

MAIGRET et son mort



O. REYNAUD

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LEFRANÇO • LE ROCHER

Maigret's Dead Man

also published as

Maigret's Special Murder

MAIGRET ET SON MORT.

THE 56TH EPISODE IN THE MAIGRET SAGA

1948

Georges Simenon

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A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

"Maigret's dead man" had called him three times in one afternoon, saying his life was in danger and asking for police protection. At 2:00 the next morning his crumpled body was found, brutally stabbed, in the middle of the Place de la Concorde, but there were indications that he had been killed elsewhere and brought to a place where his body could not long go unnoticed.

In as fine a piece of deductive detection as he had ever done, Inspector Maigret identified the dead man, established his habits, and pieced together the details of his life; his findings led the police into the crowded, fetid, fascinating underworld of the Paris slums, where Maigret had a rendezvous with danger.

Scene: Paris

Published in France under the title of Maigret et Son Mort

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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MAIGRET'S DEAD MAN

ONE



Excuse me, madame...”

After long minutes of patient endeavor, Maigret at last managed to interrupt his visitor.

“You’re telling me now that your daughter is slowly poisoning you...”

“It’s the truth.”

“A while ago you said with equal conviction that it was your son-in-law who contrived to come across the maid in the hall and pour poison into your coffee, or your herb tea...”

“It’s the truth.”

“And yet”—he consulted, or pretended to consult, the notes he had taken during the course of the interview, which had been going on for over an hour—“you told me to begin with that your daughter and her husband detest each other.”

“That’s the truth too, Chief Inspector.”

“And they’re plotting to kill you?”

“No! The point is... they’re trying separately to kill me, do you see?”

“And your niece, Rita?”

“Separately too.”

It was February. The weather was mild and sunny, with an occasional shower from the soft clouds drifting across the sky. Three times, however, since his visitor had come, Maigret had poked his stove, the last remaining stove at Police Headquarters, which he had had such a struggle to keep when the central heating was installed at the Quai des Orfèvres.

The woman must have been bathed in sweat under her mink coat, under the black silk of her dress, under the load of jewels adorning her ears, neck, wrists, and bosom, like a gypsy. And

she looked more like a gypsy than a lady of fashion, with her gaudy make-up, which had begun to cake and was now melting.

“In short, there are three people trying to poison you.”

“They’re not only trying to... they’ve started.”

“And you suggest that they’re doing it without one another’s knowledge...”

“I don’t merely suggest, I’m sure of it.”

She had the same Rumanian accent as a famous actress from the Boulevard theaters, the same sudden outbursts that never failed to startle him.

“I’m not crazy... Read this... You know Professor Touchard, I suppose. He’s the man they call in as an expert in important trials.”

She had thought of everything, even of consulting the most famous psychiatrist in Paris and asking him for a note certifying that she was in her right mind.

There was nothing to be done but to wait patiently, occasionally scribbling a few words on a pad in order to satisfy her. She had had herself introduced by a minister who had telephoned in person to the chief of Police Headquarters. Her husband, who had died a few weeks earlier, had been a state councilor. She lived on Rue de Presbourg, in one of those huge stone houses overlooking the Place de l’Etoile.

“As for my son-in-law, this is what happens... I’ve studied the matter... I’ve been watching him for months...”

“So he started while your husband was still alive?”

She showed him a plan of the first floor of her house, which she had drawn with great care.

“My room is marked A... my daughter’s and her husband’s B... but Gaston has not been sleeping there for some time.”

The telephone rang, at long last, giving Maigret a moment’s respite.

“Hello... who’s speaking?”

Usually the switchboard operator put people through to him only in urgent cases.

“Excuse me, Chief Inspector... somebody who won’t give his name insists on talking to you. He says it’s a matter of life and death.”

“And he wants to speak to me personally?”

“Yes... shall I put him on?”

And Maigret heard an anxious voice saying:

“Hello... is that you?”

“Chief Inspector Maigret, yes...”

“Forgive me... my name wouldn’t mean anything to you... You don’t know me, but you’ve met my wife Nine... Are you there? I have to tell you everything very fast, because he may be here any minute...”

At first Maigret thought: “Another lunatic. It’s the day for them.”

For he had noticed that one usually gets a run of lunatics, as if they were influenced by certain phases of the moon. He resolved to look at the calendar.

“I wanted to come and see you at first... I hung around the Quai des Orfèvres, but I didn’t dare go in, because he was following me... He wouldn’t have hesitated to shoot...”

“Who are you talking about?”

“One moment... I’m not far away... across from your office. I could see your window a minute ago... Quai des Grands Augustins... You know a little café called Aux Caves du Beaujolais? I’ve just come into the phone booth... Hello... are you listening?”

It was ten minutes past eleven in the morning, and Maigret automatically noted the time on his pad, then the name of the café.

“I’ve thought of every possible solution... I spoke to a policeman on Place du Châtelet.”

“When?”

“Half an hour ago... One of the men was following me... It was the short dark one... There are several of them. They work in relays... I’m not sure I can recognize all of them... I know the short dark fellow’s one of them.”

A silence.

“Hello,” Maigret said.

The silence lasted for a few moments, then the voice was heard again.

“Excuse me... I heard somebody coming into the café and I thought it was him... I opened the phone-booth door to see, but it was only a delivery man... hello.”

“What did you tell the policeman?”

“That some men had been following me since last night... No, since yesterday afternoon... I told him they’re waiting for a chance to kill me... I asked him to arrest the man who was behind me.”

“Did the policeman refuse?”

“He asked me to show him the man, and when I tried to, I couldn’t see him any longer... So he didn’t believe me... I took the chance to go down into the métro... I jumped into a car and got off just as the train was starting... I went along all the passages... I came out again across from the big store by the Hôtel-de-Ville and I went through the shops, too...”

He must have been walking fast, if not running, for he was hoarse and breathless.

“What I’m asking you to do is to send a plain-clothes man right away... To the Caves du Beaujolais... He mustn’t speak to me... He mustn’t seem to notice me... I’ll go out... Then the other fellow’s sure to follow me... Just have him arrested, and I’ll come and see you and explain everything.”

“Hello!”

“I said I’ll—”

Silence. A confused noise.

“Hello... hello...!”

There was nobody on the line now.

“I was telling you.” The old lady imperturbably resumed her tale of poisoning as she saw Maigret hang up.

“One minute, if you don’t mind.”

He went to open the door leading into the detectives’ office.

“Janvier. Put on your hat and run across to the Quai des Grands Augustins. There’s a little café there called Aux Caves du Beaujolais. Ask if the fellow who’s just been phoning is still there.”

He picked up the receiver again.

“Get me the Caves du Beaujolais.”

At the same time he was looking out of the window and, on the other bank of the Seine, where the Quai des Grands Augustins forms an approach ramp to the Pont St. Michel, he could see the narrow front of a homely bistro into which he had occasionally gone for a glass of wine at the bar.

He remembered that you went down one step, that the room was cool, and that the proprietor wore a black apron.

A truck parked in front of the café was obscuring the view of the door. People were walking past on the sidewalk.

“You see, Chief Inspector...”

“One moment, please, madame!”

And he went on carefully stuffing his pipe, looking out of the window meanwhile.

That old woman, with her tales about poisoning, was going to waste his whole morning, if not longer. She had brought heaps of papers with her, plans, certificates, even analyses of her food which she had had her druggist make for her.

“I’ve always had my suspicions, you understand.”

She exuded a strong, sickly scent that filled the room and successfully drowned the wholesome smell of pipe tobacco.

“Hello! Can’t you get that number for me?”

“I’m trying to get it, Chief Inspector... I keep asking for it. It’s always busy. Maybe they’ve left the phone off the hook.”

Janvier, jacketless, loose-limbed, strode across the bridge and went into the bistro. The truck finally moved off, but the inside of the café was too dark to be seen. A few minutes longer. Then the telephone rang.

“Here you are, Chief Inspector. I’ve got your number. It’s ringing.”

“Hello... who’s speaking? Is that you, Janvier?... The phone was off the hook?... Well?”

“Well, there was a little fellow here telephoning...”

“Did you see him?”

“No. He’d gone when I got here. Seems he kept looking through the window of the phone booth and opening the door.”

“And then?”

“A customer came in and looked at the booth and then ordered a drink at the bar... As soon as the other fellow saw him he stopped talking.”

“They both left?”

“Yes, one behind the other.”

“Try and get the owner to describe them both in as much detail as possible... Hello!... While you’re at it, come back across the Place du Châtelet... Ask the men on duty... Try and find out whether any of them, about three quarters of an hour ago, were approached by the same fellow asking them to arrest the man who was following him.”

When he hung up, the old woman was looking at him with satisfaction and saying approvingly, as though she were giving him a good mark:

“That’s just how I think an investigation ought to be made. You waste no time. You think of everything.”

He sat down again with a sigh. He had been on the point of opening the window, for he was beginning to feel stifled in the

overheated room, but he did not want to spoil his chance of cutting short the visit of the minister's protégée.

Aubain-Vasconcelos. That was her name. It was to remain engraved on his memory, although he never saw her again. Did she die soon afterward? Probably not. He would have heard about it. Perhaps she had to be shut up. Perhaps, discouraged by the police, she had gone to some private agency. Or again, perhaps she had awakened next morning with a different obsession.

In any case, he had to spend almost an hour longer listening to her tales about all those who, in that huge house on Rue de Presbourg, where life must have been pretty grim, tried from morning till night to poison her.

At twelve o'clock he was at last able to open his window, then, with his pipe between his teeth, went into the chief's room.

"Did you get rid of her all right?"

"As tactfully as I could."

"It seems that in her day she was one of the most beautiful women in Europe. I knew her husband a little, the gentlest, dimmest, most boring man imaginable. Are you coming, Maigret?"

He hesitated. There was a faint breath of spring about the streets. At the Brasserie Dauphine tables were already set out on the terrace, and the chief's remark seemed an invitation to go there for a quiet apéritif before lunch.

"I think I'd better stay here. I had an odd phone call this morning."

He was just going to talk about it, when the telephone rang. The chief answered and passed the phone to Maigret.

"It's for you."

And immediately the inspector recognized the voice, which was even more distraught than it had been that morning.

"Hello! We were interrupted just now. He came in. He could hear through the door of the phone booth. I was scared..."

“Where are you?”

“At the Tabac des Vosges, at the corner of the Place des Vosges and Rue des Francs Bourgeois... I tried to shake him off. I don’t know if I did, but I swear I’m not wrong—he’s going to try to kill me. It’d take too long to explain... I thought the others might laugh at me, but that *you*—”

“Hello!”

“He’s here... I... excuse me...”

The chief was looking at Maigret, who was scowling.

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know... it’s a crazy story... do you mind if I... ?”

He picked up another phone.

“Get me the Tabac des Vosges right away... Yes, the proprietor...”

To the chief he added:

“Provided this time he’s not forgotten to hang up!”

The phone rang almost immediately.

“Hello!... Tabac des Vosges? Is this the proprietor?... Is the customer who’s just phoned still in your place?... What’s that?... Yes, go and make sure... Hello!... He’s just left?... Did he pay?... Tell me, did another customer come in while he was phoning?... No?... On the terrace?... See if he’s still there... He’s left too?... Without waiting for the drink he ordered?... Thank you... No... Who’s this, you say?... The police... No, no trouble...”

At that point he decided not to go with the chief to the Brasserie Dauphine. When he opened the door of the detectives’ room, Janvier had come back and was waiting for him.

“Come into my room. Tell me about it.”

“He’s a strange guy... a little fellow in a fawn raincoat, with a gray hat and black shoes... He burst into the Caves du Beaujolais and rushed to the phone booth, shouting to the

bartender, 'Serve me anything you like...' The manager could see him through the window, making gestures... then when the other customer came in the first one popped out like a jack-in-the-box and went away without drinking anything or saying anything, and he ran off toward the Place St. Michel."

"And the other fellow?"

"A little guy too... well, not very tall, squat, black-haired..."

"And the policeman at the Place du Châtelet?"

"The story's true. The fellow in the raincoat came up to him, out of breath and excited. He was waving his arms and asking him to arrest somebody who was following him, but he couldn't identify anyone in the crowd... The policeman was going to describe him in his report."

"Get over to the Place des Vosges, to the tobacco store on the corner of Rue des Francs Bourgeois."

"All right."

A little fellow in a fawn raincoat and a gray hat, waving his arms. That was all that was known about him. There was nothing else to be done but to stay in front of the window watching the crowd emerge from offices and invade cafés, terraces, restaurants. Paris was looking bright and gay. As always happens midway through February, the first breath of spring was more welcome than when spring was actually there, and the newspapers would no doubt soon be talking about the famous chestnut tree on Boulevard St. Germain, which would be in flower in a month's time.

Maigret called the Brasserie Dauphine.

"Hello, Joseph?... Maigret... Can you bring me a pint and some sandwiches?... For one, yes."

Before the sandwiches had arrived he had a phone call, and he recognized the voice at once, for he had warned the switchboard to put through his calls without wasting a second.

"Hello!... This time I think I've got rid of him..."

"Who are you?"

“Nine’s husband... it doesn’t matter... There are four of them at least, not counting the woman... It’s absolutely essential for somebody to come right now and—”

This time he had not been able to say where he was calling from. Maigret rang the operator. That took a few minutes. The call had come from the Quatre Sergents de La Rochelle, a restaurant on Boulevard Beaumarchais, close to the Place de la Bastille.

It was not far from the Place des Vosges, either. One could practically trace the zigzag course through a single district of the little man in the raincoat.

“Hello, is that you, Janvier?... I thought you might still be there...”

Maigret was calling him at the Place des Vosges.

“Hurry over to the Quatre Sergents de La Rochelle... Yes, keep your taxi...”

An hour passed without a telephone call, without any news of Nine’s husband. When the bell rang, it was not he who spoke but a café waiter.

“Hello! Am I speaking to Chief Inspector Maigret?... To Chief Inspector Maigret in person?... I’m the waiter at the Café de Birague, Rue de Birague. I’m speaking for a customer who asked me to call you...”

“How long ago?”

“About a quarter of an hour... I was to phone right away but it was our rush hour...”

“A little man in a raincoat?”

“Yes... good... I was afraid it might be a hoax... He seemed in a big hurry... He kept looking into the street... Wait till I remember exactly... He told me to tell you he was going to try and lead his man to the Canon de la Bastille. You know it? It’s the *brasserie* at the corner of Boulevard Henri IV... He wanted you to send somebody as fast as you could... Wait a second... There was something else... You’ll probably understand... These were his exact words: ‘The man’s

changed. Now it's the big redheaded one, the worst of the lot...' ”

Maigret went there himself. He had taken a taxi that reached the Place de la Bastille in less than ten minutes. The *brasserie* was a big quiet place, frequented chiefly by regular customers eating the *plat du jour* or cold meat. He looked around for a man in a raincoat, then examined the coat racks, hoping to catch sight of a fawn raincoat.

“Tell me, waiter...”

There were six waiters, as well as the cashier and the proprietor. He questioned them all. Nobody had noticed his man. Then he sat down in a corner close to the door, ordered a half pint, and waited, smoking his pipe. Half an hour later, in spite of his sandwiches, he ordered a *choucroute*. He watched the people passing by along the sidewalk. At the sight of every raincoat he gave a start, and there were plenty of them, for a shower was falling for the third time that day, a light, clear shower, the innocent sort of rain that does not prevent the sun from shining.

“Hello, Police Headquarters?... Maigret... Is Janvier back?... Put me through to him... Is that you, Janvier?... Jump into a taxi and meet me here at the Canon de la Bastille... Yes, this does seem to be the day for cafés... I'll be waiting for you... No, nothing new.”

If the little man who waved his arms around was a fake, that was just too bad. Maigret left Janvier to keep watch at the Canon de la Bastille, and took the taxi back to his office.

There was little likelihood that Nine's husband had been murdered since half-past twelve, for he seemed not to have gone into unfrequented places; on the contrary, he had chosen busy streets and districts full of life and bustle. However, the chief inspector got in touch with the Emergency Squad, which was kept informed from one minute to the next of all the incidents that occurred in Paris.

“If you hear that a man wearing a raincoat has had an accident, or a fight, anything like that, give me a ring...”

He also ordered a Police Headquarters car to be left at his disposal in the courtyard at the Quai des Orfèvres. It was absurd, perhaps, but he was taking no chances.

He saw visitors, smoked pipes, poked his stove from time to time, and kept his window open, occasionally casting a reproachful glance at his telephone, which remained mute.

“You’ve met my wife...” the man had said.

He tried mechanically to remember a woman called Nine. He must have met a good many. He’d known one a few years earlier who had a small bar in Cannes, but she was old then and was no doubt dead by now. There was also a niece of his wife by the name of Aline, and everybody called her Nine.

“Hello, Chief Inspector Maigret?”

It was four o’clock. It was still broad daylight, but Maigret had switched on the green-shaded lamp on his desk.

“This is the postmaster of Number Twenty-eight post office on

Rue du Faubourg St.

Denis. I’m sorry to trouble you... it’s probably a hoax... A few minutes ago a man came up to the registered-mail counter. He seemed in a big hurry and looked afraid, so the clerk, Mademoiselle Denfer, told me. He kept on turning around... He pushed a paper in front of her... He said, ‘Don’t try to understand... Call up Chief Inspector Maigret and give him this message,’ and then he vanished into the crowd.

“My clerk came to see me. I’ve got the paper in front of me. It’s written in pencil, in a scrawl. The man probably scribbled it as he was walking.

“Here it is: ‘*I couldn’t go to the Canon.*’ Do you understand what that means? I don’t. It doesn’t matter... Then there’s a word I can’t make out... ‘*Now there are two of them. The short dark one has come back.*’ I’m not sure of the word dark... What did you say? All right, if you think it’s really that. There’s something more... ‘*I’m sure they’ve decided to get me today. I’m going toward the Quai. But they’re smart. Warn the police.*’

“That’s all. If you like I’ll have the note sent to you by messenger... In a taxi?... All right, if you pay the fare, because I can’t be responsible...”

“Hello, Janvier?... You can come back, old man.”

Half an hour later they both sat smoking in Maigret’s room, where a tiny red disc was glowing under the stove.

“I hope you took time off for lunch.”

“I had a *choucroute* at the Canon.”

Just like Maigret! Meanwhile he had alerted the motorcycle patrols and the city police. Parisians trooping into the big stores, jostling one another on the sidewalk, plunging into movies or métro stations, had noticed nothing, and yet hundreds of eyes had been watching the crowds, lingering over every light overcoat and every gray hat.

There was another shower, about five o’clock, when the bustle was at its peak in the Châtelet district. The sidewalks glistened, street lights acquired halos, and every ten yards or so along the sidewalk people raised their arms to hail passing taxis.

“The proprietor of the Caves du Beaujolais puts him at thirty-five to forty... The one at the Tabac des Vosges at about thirty... He’s clean-shaven, fresh-complexioned, has light-colored eyes. I can’t find out what sort of man he is. I was told, ‘The sort of man you see a lot of.’ ”

Madame Maigret, who was entertaining her sister at dinner, called at six o’clock to make sure her husband was not going to be late and to ask him to stop at the bakery on his way home.

“Will you keep watch till nine? I’ll ask Lucas to relieve you then.”

Janvier was quite willing. There was nothing to do but wait.

“Call me at home if anything happens.”

He did not forget the bakery on Avenue de la République, the only place in Paris, according to Madame Maigret, where you could get good *mille-feuilles*. He kissed his sister-in-law,

who always smelled of lavender. They had dinner. He drank a glass of calvados. Before seeing Odette to the métro he called up Headquarters.

“Lucas?... Anything new?... Are you still in my office?”

Lucas must have been sitting in Maigret’s own armchair, reading, with his feet on the desk.

“All right, then. Good night.”

When he came back from the métro, Boulevard Richard Lenoir was deserted and his footsteps echoed. He heard other steps behind him. He gave a start and involuntarily turned around, because he was thinking of the man who, at this very moment, was perhaps still hurrying anxiously through the streets, avoiding dark corners and seeking a little security in bars and cafés.

He fell asleep in front of his wife—at least so she declared, as usual, just as she also declared that he snored— and the alarm clock, on the bedside table, showed twenty minutes past two when the telephone startled him from his sleep. It was Lucas.

“Maybe I’m bothering you for nothing, Chief. I don’t know much about it yet. The night desk at Emergency just told me that a man has been found dead in the Place de la Concorde, near the Quai des Tuileries. It’s a matter for the First Arrondissement... I’ve asked them to leave everything as is... What’s that?... All right. If you like. I’ll send you a taxi.”

Madame Maigret sighed as she saw her husband pulling on his trousers and hunting for his shirt.

“D’you suppose it’ll take long?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Couldn’t you have sent a sergeant?”

When he opened the sideboard in the dining room, she realized that it was to pour himself a small glass of calvados.

Then he came back to get his pipes, which he had forgotten.

The taxi was waiting for him. The Grands Boulevards were almost deserted. A huge moon, more than usually brilliant, was floating above the greenish dome of the Opéra.

In the Place de la Concorde two cars were parked at the sidewalk close to the Tuileries Gardens, and dark figures were moving about.

The first thing Maigret noticed when he got out of his taxi was the dark patch made on the silver pavement by a fawn raincoat.

Then, while the policemen in their capes moved aside and an officer from the First Arrondissement came toward him, he muttered:

“It wasn’t a hoax... they got him!”

The cool sound of lapping water came from the nearby Seine, and cars were gliding noiselessly from Rue Royale toward the Champs Elysées. The luminous sign of Maxim’s glowed red in the night.

“Stabbed with a knife, Chief Inspector,” announced Sergeant Lequeux, an old acquaintance of Maigret. “We waited to take it out till you came.”

Why, from that moment, did Maigret feel that something was wrong?

The Place de la Concorde was too vast, too cool, too airy, with the white thrust of the obelisk at its center. It did not tally with those morning telephone calls, with the Caves du Beaujolais and the Tabac des Vosges and the Quatre Sergents on Boulevard Beaumarchais.

Right up till his final appeal, to the note entrusted to the post office on Faubourg St. Denis, the man had kept to a district with narrow, crowded streets.

Would a man who felt himself hunted, who was aware of a murderer at his heels, and who expected to be struck down at any moment venture into the wide open spaces of the Place de la Concorde?

“You’ll see that he was not killed here.”

The proof was forthcoming an hour later, when Officer Piedboeuf, on duty in front of a night club on Rue de Douai, put in his report.

A car had stopped in front of the club, with two men in dinner jackets and two women in evening dress. They were in high spirits and a little drunk, particularly one of the men, who, when the others had gone in, retraced his steps.

“Officer, I don’t know if I’m doing right to tell you this, for I don’t want our evening spoiled... Well, can’t be helped! You can make what you like of it... Just now as we were passing through the Place de la Concorde, a car stopped in front of us... I was driving and I slowed down, because I thought the other car was having engine trouble... They took something out of the car and put it down on the pavement... I think it was a body...

“The car was a yellow Citroën with a Paris number, and the two last figures on its license plate were three and eight.”

TWO

« ^ »

At what point did Nine's husband become Maigret's dead man, as they came to call him at Police Headquarters? Perhaps at their very first meeting, if one can call it that, that night in the Place de la Concorde. Detective Sergeant Lequeux, at all events, was struck by the chief inspector's attitude. It was difficult to say precisely in what way it was unusual.

Policemen are used to violent deaths, to the most unexpected corpses, which they handle with professional indifference when they are not joking about them like medical students in a hospital ward. Maigret, moreover, did not seem to be moved, in the strict sense of the word. But why, for instance, did he not begin by examining the body, as would have been natural? He first puffed a little at his pipe, and stood among the uniformed policemen, chatting with Lequeux and casually watching a young woman in a lamé dress and mink coat, who had just got out of a car with a couple of men and was waiting, clutching one of them by the arm as if something else were going to happen.

It was not until some time had elapsed that he went slowly up to the prostrate form and the brown patch that was the raincoat, and bent over them, still slowly—as he might have done if it had been a friend or a relative, Sergeant Lequeux commented later.

And when he stood up again he was frowning, you could feel that he was angry, and he demanded, in a tone that seemed to imply the responsibility of all those present:

“Who did this?”

Whether with blows or with kicks it was impossible to tell, but in any case, before or after being stabbed, the man had been struck repeatedly with such violence that his face was swollen, one lip split, and half of his features rendered unrecognizable.

“I'm expecting the morgue van,” Lequeux announced.

Before it was battered, the man's face must have been quite an ordinary one, youngish and probably rather merry. Even in death there was something ingenuous about its expression.

Why was the woman in the mink coat more upset by the sight of a foot wearing only a mauve sock? That unshod foot looked ridiculous lying on the pavement, beside another foot in a black kid shoe. It seemed naked and intimate, somehow not really dead. Maigret went to pick up the second shoe on the pavement, six or seven yards away.

After that, he said nothing more. He waited and smoked. Other curious onlookers joined the group, talking in whispers. Then the morgue van stopped by the curb, and two men lifted up the corpse. Beneath it the ground was bare, devoid of any trace of blood.

“Send me your report, Lequeux.”

It was at this point, surely, that Maigret took possession of the dead man, as he climbed up in the front of the van and left the others standing there.

This went on all through the night. It went on all next morning. You would have thought the body was his private property, that this dead man was his own special dead man.

He had given orders for Moers, one of the specialists of the Technical Branch, to meet him at the Medicolegal Institute. Moers was young, lean, and tall, with an unsmiling face and thick glasses hiding timid eyes.

“Get to work, young fellow...”

Dr. Paul had also been sent for, and was expected at any moment. They were alone, except for a caretaker and, in their frozen cubbyholes, the anonymous bodies found in Paris during the last few days.

The light was crude; they were sparing of speech and precise of gesture. They seemed like conscientious workmen on night shift, absorbed in a delicate task.

In the pockets they found scarcely anything. A package of coarse tobacco and a sheaf of cigarette papers, a box of matches, a cheap penknife, an old-fashioned key, a pencil, and

a handkerchief with no initial, some small change in the trousers pocket, but no wallet, no identification.

Moers picked up the clothes one by one, with the greatest care, and slipped each of them into a bag of waxed paper, which he then closed. He did this with the shirt, as well as with the shoes and socks. Everything was of average quality. The jacket bore the label of a ready-to-wear shop on Boulevard Sébastopol, and the trousers, which were newer, did not match it in color.

The corpse was naked when Dr. Paul appeared, his beard neat and his eyes bright, although he had been roused in the middle of the night.

“Well, well, Maigret, old fellow, what’s this poor man got to tell us?”

For the problem now was to get the dead man to speak. This was a matter of routine. Normally Maigret would have gone home to bed and in the morning would have received the various reports in his office.

But he insisted on watching the whole performance, with his pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, and a vague, dreamy look in his eyes.

“It’s not going to be easy to make him look cheerful,” the photographer commented after examining the face of the dead man.

This was all still a routine job. First, photographs of the body and of the wound. Then, a photograph of the face, to be handed out to the press for purposes of identification; this had to be as lifelike as possible. That was why the technical expert was engaged in making up the corpse, which now appeared in the icy light more wan than ever, but with pink cheeks and a painted mouth like a streetwalker’s.

“It’s all yours, Doctor.”

“Are you staying, Maigret?”

He stayed. To the very end. It was half-past six in the morning when Dr. Paul and he went to drink laced coffee in a little bar whose shutters had just been opened.

“I suppose you don’t want to wait for my report... Tell me, is this an important case?”

“I don’t know...”

All around them, workmen were eating their *croissants*, still sleepy-eyed, and the early morning mist spangled their overcoats with moisture. It was chilly. In the streets, each passer-by was preceded by a little cloud of steam. Windows were lighting up, one after the other, on the different floors of all the houses.

“I’ll say, to begin with, that he’s a man in a humble walk of life. Probably in his childhood he was poor and ill cared for, to go by the bone formation and the condition of his teeth. His hands don’t suggest any particular occupation... They’re strong but fairly well kept... He can’t have been a manual worker... nor a clerk, either, as his fingers show none of those slight distortions that come from doing a lot of writing or typing... On the other hand, he’s got the tender feet and dropped arches of somebody who spends his life standing up...”

Maigret took no notes; it was all engraved on his memory.

“Let’s pass on to the important question: the time of the crime... I’m quite safe in saying it was committed between eight and ten last night...”

Maigret had already been informed by telephone of the statements of the midnight revelers, and of the yellow Citroën in the Place de la Concorde shortly after one in the morning.

“Doctor, don’t you notice something unusual?”

“What do you mean?”

For thirty-five years Dr. Paul, with his almost legendary beard, had been a police surgeon, and he was more familiar with criminal cases than were most policemen.

“The murder was not done in the Place de la Concorde.”

“Obviously.”

“It was probably done in some out-of-the-way spot.”

“Probably.”

“Usually, when people take the risk of transporting a body, especially in a place like Paris, they do so to hide it, to try and make it disappear or delay its discovery.”

“You’re right, Maigret. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But this time we find people running the risk of getting caught, or of putting us on their trail, in order to deposit a body in the very heart of Paris, in the most public place, where it could not have lain for ten minutes, even in the middle of the night, without being discovered...”

“In other words, the murderers wanted it discovered. That’s your idea, isn’t it?”

“Not quite. It doesn’t matter.”

“All the same they took care that it should not be easily recognized. The blows on the face were not made with bare fists, but with a heavy instrument, the shape of which I’m sorry that I can’t identify...”

“Before death?”

“After... a few minutes after.”

“You’re sure it was only a few minutes after?”

“Less than half an hour, I’d say... Now, Maigret, there’s another point I’ll probably not mention in my report, because I’m not certain of it and I don’t want to be contradicted by counsel when this case goes before the Assize Court... I examined the wound closely, you saw me... I’ve had hundreds of knife wounds to examine in my time... I’ll swear this one wasn’t unpremeditated...”

“Imagine two men standing face to face, having an argument... One of them strikes... He couldn’t possibly make a wound like the one I’ve been examining, and the wound wasn’t struck from behind, either...”

“On the other hand, imagine someone sitting down, or even standing up, but absorbed in something else... The murderer comes up behind, slips an arm around him and stabs him with a powerful, accurate thrust...”

“Even more precisely, it’s as if the victim had been tied up, or held, and then been literally ‘operated on’... you follow?”

“I follow...”

Maigret was well aware that Nine’s husband could not have been taken by surprise, since for the past twenty-four hours he had been a fugitive from his murderers.

The problem that for Dr. Paul was merely a theoretical one had warmer human implications for Maigret.

He had been able to hear the man’s voice. He had almost seen him. He had followed him step by step, from one bistro to another, during the course of his frantic journeying through certain districts of Paris, always the same ones, in the Châtelet-Bastille area.

The two men were walking along the embankment together, Maigret smoking his pipe, and Dr. Paul one cigarette after another—he never stopped smoking during an autopsy and often declared that tobacco is the best antiseptic. Dawn was breaking. Strings of boats had begun their trips down the Seine. Tramps, stiff-limbed after the night in the cold, could be seen climbing the steps from the quayside after sleeping in the shelter of a bridge.

“The man was killed very soon after his last meal, maybe right after it.”

“Do you know what he’d eaten?”

“Pea soup, some cod—in *brandade*—and an apple. He’d had white wine to drink. I also found some traces of hard liquor in the stomach.”

They happened to be passing the Caves du Beaujolais, where the proprietor had just taken down the wooden shutters. They caught a glimpse of the dark room, and a passing whiff of cheap wine.

“Are you going home?” the doctor asked as he prepared to hail a taxi.

“I’m stopping by the Technical Branch.”

The great building on the Quai des Orfèvres was almost empty except for the team of cleaners in the halls and on the stairs, still reeking with winter dampness.

In his office Maigret found Lucas, who had fallen asleep in the armchair.

“Anything new?”

“The papers have the photo, but only a few of them will put it in this morning—they got it so late.”

“The car?”

“I’ve got to my third yellow Citroën, but none of them fits so far.”

“Did you call Janvier?”

“He’s coming at eight o’clock to relieve me.”

“If anyone wants me, I’ll be upstairs... Tell the switchboard to put all calls through to me there.”

He was not sleepy, but he felt heavy, his movements were slower than usual. He climbed a narrow staircase to which the public was not admitted, leading to the attics of the Palais de Justice. He barely opened a door with frosted glass, caught a glimpse of Moers bending over some apparatus, went on and reached the Records Office.

Before he said a word, the fingerprints man was shaking his head.

“Not a thing, Chief Inspector.”

In other words, Nine’s husband had never been up against French justice.

Maigret left the Records library and went back to see Moers, taking off his overcoat and then, after a moment’s hesitation, his tie, which was choking him.

The dead man was not here, but he seemed as undeniably present as in Compartment 17 of the Medicolegal Institute, where the caretaker had put him.

They spoke little. Each went on working without noticing that a ray of sunshine had crept through the attic window. In one corner stood a jointed dummy that had been used on many occasions and that Maigret was using once again.

Moers, who had had time to beat the clothes in their separate paper bags, was analyzing the dust collected.

Maigret, in his turn, was busy with the clothes. With careful movements, like a window dresser, he began by putting the shirt and trousers on the dummy, which was about the same size as the dead man.

He had just slipped the jacket onto it when Janvier came in, fresh and bright, for he had slept in his own bed and had got up only when day broke.

“So they got him, Chief.”

He glanced around at Moers and gave him a wink, implying that the chief inspector was not in a conversational mood.

“We’ve just heard of another yellow car. It’s Lucas who’s on the job and he says it’s not ours—the number ends with a nine and not an eight.”

Maigret was standing back to look at his work.

“Does anything look wrong to you?” he asked.

“Wait a minute... no... I can’t see... he wasn’t as tall as the dummy... The jacket looks too short...”

“Is that all?”

“The tear made by the knife isn’t very wide...”

“Anything else?”

“He wasn’t wearing a vest...”

“What strikes *me* is that the jacket isn’t made of the same stuff as the trousers, and it’s a different color...”

“That happens, you know...”

“Just a minute. Take a good look at the trousers. They’re practically new. The jacket belongs to a different suit, at least two years old.”

“It looks like it, yes...”

“He was careful of his appearance, to judge by his socks, shirt, and tie... Call up the Caves du Beaujolais and the other bistros... Try to find out if he was wearing yesterday a jacket and trousers that didn’t match.”

Janvier settled down in a corner, and his voice provided a kind of background noise to the room. He rang up all the cafés in turn, repeating endlessly:

“This is Police Headquarters... The officer you saw yesterday... Can you tell me whether...”

Unfortunately the man had not taken off his raincoat anywhere. He might have unbuttoned it, but nobody had noticed the color of his jacket.

“What do you do when you get home?”

And Janvier, who had been married only a year, replied with a sly smile:

“I give my wife a kiss...”

“And then?”

“I sit down and she brings me my slippers...”

“And then?”

The sergeant pondered, then suddenly clapped his hand to his forehead.

“I get you! I change my jacket...”

“Have you a special jacket you wear in the house?”

“No... I put on an old jacket I feel more comfortable in...”

And the words suddenly showed the unknown man in a more intimate light. One could picture him going home and, perhaps, like Janvier, giving his wife a kiss. In any case, he had taken off his new jacket and put on an old one. He had eaten a meal.

“What day is today?”

“Thursday.”

“Yesterday was Wednesday, then. Do you often eat in restaurants? In cheap restaurants, like those our man must have gone to?”

As he spoke, Maigret was drawing the fawn raincoat over the shoulders of the dummy. The day before, at about the same time or a little later, that coat had still been on the back of a living man as he went into the Caves du Beaujolais, out there almost under their eyes; they had only to look through the dormer window toward the other side of the Seine to see the front of it.

And the man had called Maigret. He had not asked to speak to an inspector or a detective sergeant or, like some people who think their business is important, to the chief himself.

It was Maigret that he wanted.

“You don’t know me,” he had admitted.

It was true that he had added:

“You’ve met my wife Nine...”

Janvier wondered what the chief was getting at, with this restaurant business.

“Do you like *brandade*?”

“I love it. It’s a little hard to digest, but I eat it all the same whenever I get the chance.”

“Exactly! Does your wife often make it for you?”

“No. It’s too much trouble to prepare. It’s not a dish you often make at home.”

“So you eat it in a restaurant when they’ve got it.”

“Yes.”

“Is it often on the menu?”

“I don’t know... wait a minute... sometimes on Fridays...”

“And yesterday was Wednesday... Call up Dr. Paul for me.”

The doctor, who was busy preparing his report, showed no surprise at Maigret’s question.

“Can you tell me if there were truffles in the *brandade*?”

“Certainly not... I’d have found traces.”

“Thank you... There you are, Janvier! There were no truffles in the *brandade*. That rules out expensive restaurants, where they usually put them in. Go down to the detectives’ room. Get Torrence and two or three others to help you. The switchboard won’t like it because you’re going to tie up all the lines for a while. Call up the restaurants one after the other, beginning with the ones in the district where you were working yesterday. Find out if any of them had *brandade* on their evening menus... Wait a moment... try those with a Southern name first—that’s where you’ll most likely be in luck.”

Janvier went off, scarcely flattered or delighted by the job entrusted to him.

“Have you a knife, Moers?”

The morning was wearing on, and Maigret was still obsessed by his dead man.

“Put the tip of it through the tear in the raincoat... Good... now don’t move...”

He lifted the material slightly to look at the jacket underneath.

“The tears in the two garments don’t coincide... Now strike a different way... Stand on the left... stand on the right... strike from above... from below...”

“I get it.”

A few technicians and assistants at work in the huge laboratory were casting sidelong glances at them and exchanging amused looks.

“It still doesn’t fit... There’s a good four inches between the tear in the jacket and the one in the coat... Bring a chair, give me a hand.”

They sat the dummy down, a process requiring infinite care.

“Good... When a man’s sitting down, in front of a table for instance, his coat might conceivably get hitched up... Try...”

But in vain did they try to match the two tears, which, logically, should have been lying one immediately above the other.

“There you are!” Maigret concluded as if he had just solved a difficult equation.

“You mean that when he was killed he wasn’t wearing his raincoat?”

“Almost certainly.”

“And yet there’s a tear in the coat that looks like a knife thrust.”

“It was made afterward, to give that impression. Now, a man doesn’t wear a raincoat indoors, in a house or in a restaurant... When they took the trouble to fake the raincoat, they were trying to make us think the knifing had been done outdoors... If they took that trouble...”

“...it means that the crime was committed indoors,” concluded Moers.

“For the same reason, they took the chance of carrying the corpse to the Place de la Concorde, where the murder had *not* been committed...”

He emptied his pipe by knocking it against his heel, went to get his tie, and once more contemplated the dummy, which was even more lifelike now that it was seated. From behind or from the side, when the featureless, colorless face could not be seen, this was quite striking.

“Have you found anything?”

“Hardly anything so far. I haven’t finished. In the arch of the sole, though, there are small quantities of an odd sort of mud. It’s earth impregnated with wine, like you might find in a country cellar where a cask has just been opened.”

“Keep at it. Call me at my office.”

When he went in to see the chief, the latter greeted him with the comment:

“Well, Maigret, what about your dead man?”

It was the first time the phrase had been used. Somebody must have told the chief that since two o’clock that morning the chief inspector had not been off the trail.

“They got him after all, didn’t they? I have to admit that yesterday I thought you were dealing with a practical joker or a lunatic.”

“I didn’t think so. I believed what he told me from his first phone call.”

Why? He could not have explained why. It was certainly not because the man had made a personal appeal to him. As he talked to the chief he let his eyes roam over the opposite embankment, which was bathed in sunshine.

“The Director of Prosecutions has put Judge Comélieau in charge of the preliminary investigation. They’re going to the Medicolegal Institute this morning. Will you join them?”

“What’s the point?”

“Well, you ought to see Comélieau, or call him up. He’s touchy.”

Maigret was well aware of that.

“Don’t you think it’s a case of gangsters’ revenge?”

“I don’t know. I’ll make sure, but that’s not my impression.”

The criminal set doesn’t usually take the trouble to exhibit its victims in the Place de la Concorde.

“Well, do what you can. No doubt somebody’ll turn up soon to identify him.”

“That’d surprise me...”

One more impression he would have found hard to explain. It all held together in his mind. But as soon as he tried to define things precisely, even to himself, they became confused.

There was that business of the Place de la Concorde. It meant that somebody wanted the body to be discovered, and discovered quickly. It would have been easier and less dangerous, for instance, to throw it into the Seine, where it could have stayed for days or even weeks before being fished out.

The victim was not a rich man or a public figure, but an insignificant little fellow.

Why, if they wanted the police to take an interest in him, did they smash in his face after death and empty his pockets of anything that might serve to identify him?

On the other hand, they had not taken off the manufacturer's label in the jacket, obviously, because they knew it was a ready-made garment, sold by the thousand.

"You look bothered, Maigret."

And Maigret could only go on saying:

"It doesn't hang together..."

Too many details didn't fit. And he was personally worried, not to say annoyed, by one detail in particular.

At what time had the man made his last call? Actually, the last sign of life he had given was the note handed in at the Faubourg St. Denis post office.

In his note, again, he had appealed to Maigret more urgently than ever. He had even asked him to warn the policemen on duty so that any one of them, in the street, would be ready to help him at a moment's notice.

Now he had been killed between eight and ten that evening.

What had he done between four and eight? There was no sign of him, not a trace. Silence, a silence that had made a deep impression on Maigret the day before, although he had not shown it. It had reminded him of a submarine disaster that the whole world had witnessed, so to speak, minute by minute, thanks to the radio. At one point the signals made by the men imprisoned in the sunken vessel could still be heard. One could imagine the rescue ships passing back and forth above

them. Then the signals grew faint. Then suddenly, after hours, there was silence.

The unknown man, Maigret's dead man, had had no valid reason for keeping quiet. He could not have been kidnaped in broad daylight in the busy streets of Paris. He had not been killed before eight o'clock.

Everything suggested that he had gone home, since he had changed his jacket.

He had eaten dinner at home or in a restaurant. And he had eaten in peace, since he had had time for soup, *brandade* of cod, and an apple. That apple, above all, implied tranquillity!

Why had he remained silent for at least four hours?

He had had no hesitation about disturbing the chief inspector repeatedly, and imploring him to set the police machinery in motion.

Then, all of a sudden, after four o'clock, he seemed to have changed his mind, to have decided to leave the police out of it.

It worried Maigret. It was almost as if his dead man had been unfaithful to him.

"Well, Janvier?"

The sergeants' office was blue with smoke, and four men, gloomy-eyed, were riveted to their telephones.

"No *brandade*, Chief!" Janvier sighed comically. "And we've left that district already. I've got to the Faubourg Montmartre, and Torrence has reached the Place Clichy..."

Maigret telephoned too, from his office, but it was to call a small residential hotel on Rue Lepic.

"Yes, in a taxi... right away."

On his desk lay the photographs of the dead man taken during the night. There were also the morning papers, some reports, a note from Judge Comélieau.

"Is that you, Madame Maigret?... Not too bad... I don't know yet whether I'll be home for lunch... No, I haven't had

time to shave yet. I'm going to try to get to the barber's... Yes, I've eaten..."

He did go to the barber's after warning the office messenger, old Joseph, to keep his prospective visitor waiting. He only had to cross the bridge. He went into the first barbershop on Boulevard St. Michel, and cast a disgruntled look at the baggy-eyed reflection the mirror offered him.

He knew that when he left he would not be able to resist his longing to have a drink at the Caves du Beaujolais. For one thing, because he really liked the atmosphere of that little café, where you never see many people and the proprietor chats with you familiarly. He liked Beaujolais, too, particularly when, as here, it was served in little earthenware jugs. But there was something else. He was in pursuit of his dead man.

"It gave me a strange feeling to read the paper this morning, Inspector. I didn't see much of him, you know. But when I think back, I liked the look of him. I can still see him coming in, waving his arms around. He was upset, of course, but he had a nice face. I'm willing to bet that in normal times he was a happy guy... You're going to laugh at me; the more I think about it, the more it strikes me he must have been sort of a clown... He reminds me of somebody... I've been trying to remember for hours..."

"Somebody who looks like him?"

"Yes... no... it's more complicated... He reminds me of something, and I can't tell what... Hasn't he been identified yet?"

That was odd too, though not abnormal yet. The papers had been out since that morning. True, the face had been damaged, but not to the point of being unrecognizable to somebody very familiar with it, the wife or the mother, for instance.

The man had a home somewhere, even if it was only a rooming house. He had not gone back to it all night.

Logically, during these last few hours, somebody should either have recognized his photograph or notified the police of his disappearance.

And yet Maigret was not expecting that. He went back across the bridge with a pleasant, rather rough taste of Beaujolais in his mouth. He climbed the drab staircase, watched by some people with respectful awe.

He glanced through the windows of the waiting room. His man was standing there, smoking a cigarette with a casual air.

“This way...”

He led the man into his office, showed him a chair, and then took off his hat and coat, without once failing to observe his visitor out of the corner of his eye. The man, from where he sat, was looking directly at the photographs of the dead body.

“Well, Fred?”

“I’m at your disposal, Chief Inspector... I wasn’t expecting to be sent for... I can’t think of anything that...”

He was thin and very pale, dressed with somewhat effeminate elegance. From time to time a twitch of his nostrils betrayed the drug addict.

“Do you know him?”

“I understood as soon as I came in, when I saw the photographs... He’s been badly roughed up, hasn’t he?”

“Have you ever seen him?”

Fred was clearly trying very conscientiously to do his duty as informer. He examined the photographs attentively, even went up to the window to see them in full daylight.

“No...and yet...”

Maigret waited, stoking his stove.

“No! I’d say I’ve never seen him... although he reminds me of something... It’s vague... He’s not one of the set in any case... Even if he was new I’d have met him by now.”

“What does he make you think of?”

“That’s just what I’m wondering... You don’t know his job?”

“No.”

“Or what district he lived in?”

“Not that, either.”

“He’s not from the country, you can see that...”

“I’m sure of it.”

Maigret had noticed the day before that the man had a fairly pronounced Parisian accent, the accent of working-class people, those you meet in the métro, in the bistros of the city outskirts, or on the tiered seats of the Vel’ d’Hiv’.

In fact... an idea occurred to him... he would check it later.

“Do you know a woman called Nine?”

“Wait a minute... there’s one in Marseilles, second-in-command at a brothel on Rue St. Ferréol...”

“It’s not that one, I know her... she’s at least fifty.”

Fred glanced at the photograph of the man, who looked about thirty years old, and murmured:

“It doesn’t always follow, you know!”

“Take one of these photos. Have a good hunt. Show it all over the place.”

“You can count on me... I hope to have a tip for you in the next few days. Not about this, but about a big dope peddler. So far I only know him as Monsieur Jean. I’ve never seen him. I only know he’s behind a whole set of connections. I get stuff from them regularly. It is expensive... When you’ve got some dough to spare.”

Janvier, next door, was still searching for *brandade*.

“You were right, Chief. Everybody tells me they only make *brandade* on Friday. And not often. In Holy Week, sometimes on Wednesday, but we’re a long way from Easter.”

“Leave that to Torrence. Is there anything on at the Vel’ d’Hiv’ this afternoon?”

“Let me see the paper.”

There were motorcycle races.

“Take a photo with you. Call at the ticket offices, talk to the people who sell oranges and peanuts. Make the rounds of the bistros in the neighborhood, then the cafés around Porte Dauphine.”

“D’you think he was a sports fan?”

Maigret did not know. He too had a certain feeling, like the others, like the proprietor of the Caves du Beaujolais, like Fred the informer, but it was vague and indefinable.

He could not picture his dead man in an office, nor selling things in a shop. Fred had declared that he didn’t belong to the underworld.

On the other hand, he was at home in small working-class bars.

He had a wife whose first name was Nine. And Maigret had once known her.

In what capacity? Would the man have boasted of it if the inspector had had to deal with her professionally?

“Dubonnet. Go over to the Vice Squad. Ask for the list of registered prostitutes for the last few years. Take down the addresses of all the Nines you can find. Go see them. Get the idea?”

Dubonnet was a young fellow just out of training school, somewhat stiff, always very dapper, exquisitely polite to everyone, and it may have been out of irony that Maigret entrusted him with this task.

He sent another detective to visit all the little cafés around the Châtelet, the Place des Vosges, and the Bastille.

During this time Judge Comélieau, who was directing the investigation from his study, was waiting for him impatiently, unable to understand why Maigret had not yet got in touch with him.

“The yellow Citroëns?”

“Eriau’s in charge of that.”

All this was a matter of routine. Even if it proved useless, it had to be done. On all the roads of France, policemen were stopping the drivers of yellow Citroëns.

Meanwhile, somebody had to be sent to the shop on Boulevard Sébastopol where the dead man's jacket had been bought, then to another shop on Boulevard St. Martin, from which the raincoat had come.

During all this time detectives involved in dozens of other cases kept coming in and out, telephoning, typing out their reports. People were waiting in the halls. Messengers were rushing from the Hotels Section to the Vice Squad and from the Vice Squad to Police Headquarters.

Moers's voice came over the telephone:

"Chief... just a small detail that probably isn't important. I'm finding so little I'm letting you know on the chance. I had taken a sample of hair as usual, and the analysis shows traces of lipstick..."

It was almost comical, and yet nobody laughed. A woman had kissed the hair of Maigret's dead man, a woman wearing lipstick.

"It's cheap lipstick and the woman is probably a brunette—it's a very dark red..."

Was it on the previous evening that a woman had kissed the unknown man? Was it at his home, when he had come in and changed his jacket?

Actually, if he had changed, it must have meant that he did not intend to go out again. A man who is only spending an hour at home does not bother to put on different clothes.

Or he had been called out unexpectedly... But was it credible that, hunted as he was, terrified to the point of rushing through the streets of Paris, waving his arms, and constantly calling up the police, he would have left his home after dark?

A woman had kissed his hair, or pressed her face against his cheek; in any case, it was a gesture of affection.

Maigret sighed, filling a fresh pipe, and glanced at the time. It was a few minutes after noon.

At just about the same time on the previous day, the man had been crossing the Place des Vosges with its murmuring fountains.

The chief inspector passed through the small door that led from Police Headquarters to the Palais de Justice.

Lawyers' gowns were drifting down the passages like great black birds.

"Let's go and see the old monkey," sighed Maigret, who had never been able to endure Judge Comélieu.

He knew very well that the judge would greet him with a chilly comment, intended as the most scathing of reproaches:

"I've been waiting for you, Inspector..."

He would have been quite capable of saying, like Louis XIV:

"I nearly had to wait..."

Maigret could not have cared less.

Since half-past two that morning Maigret had been living with his dead man.

THREE

« ^ »

I'm delighted, Chief Inspector, to be speaking to you at last."

"Believe me, Judge, the pleasure is all mine."

Madame Maigret looked up sharply. She always felt uneasy when her husband assumed that particular placid, bland voice, and when he spoke to her in it she would burst into tears, so disconcerting did she find it.

"I have rung up your office five times."

"And I wasn't there!" he sighed with mock consternation.

She made signs to him to be careful, to remember that he was speaking to a judge, and one whose brother-in-law had been in the Government two or three times.

“They have only just informed me that you were ill...”

“Not very ill, Judge. People exaggerate so! Just a heavy cold. And I’m not sure it’s a very heavy one!”

It may have been the fact of being at home in his pajamas and warm dressing gown, with slippers on his feet, comfortably ensconced in his armchair, that inspired this jovial mood in Maigret.

“What surprises me is that you did not let me know who was replacing you.”

“Replacing me where?”

Judge Comélieu’s voice was curt, dry, deliberately impersonal, whereas the chief inspector’s grew increasingly good-natured.

“I’m talking about the Place de la Concorde affair, I suppose you’ve not forgotten it.”

“I think of nothing else all day. I was just saying to my wife...”

And the latter signaled to him even more vehemently not to bring her into the picture. The apartment was small and cozy. The dining-room furniture, which was of dark oak, dated back to Maigret’s wedding. You could see across the street, through the net window curtains, an inscription in big black letters on a white wall: “Lhoste and Pépin, Precision Tools.”

For the past thirty years Maigret had seen those words every day, morning and night, with the great warehouse gate beneath them always flanked by two or three trucks bearing the same words, and he was not sick of them yet.

On the contrary! He liked seeing them. He ran his eyes over them almost caressingly. Then, invariably, he glanced higher up at the back of a distant house where laundry was hanging out to dry at the windows, at one of which, as soon as the weather turned mild, a red geranium appeared.

It was probably not still the same geranium, but he would have sworn, nonetheless, that the pot of flowers had been there, like himself, for the past thirty years. And during the whole of that time Maigret had never once seen anyone lean out of the window or water the plant. Somebody obviously lived in the room, but kept hours different from the chief inspector's.

"Do you think, Monsieur Maigret, that in your absence your subordinates are conducting the investigation as diligently as you could desire?"

"I'm convinced of it, Monsieur Comélieau. I'm sure of it. You can't imagine how admirably one can run an investigation of this sort in a warm, quiet room, sitting in an armchair, in one's own home, away from all agitation, with just a telephone within reach, beside the pot of herb tea. I'm going to tell you a little secret—I wonder if I would have been ill if it hadn't been for this investigation. Obviously I wouldn't, since it was in the Place de la Concorde, on the night the body was discovered, that I caught cold. Or next morning at dawn, when Dr. Paul and I walked along the embankment after the autopsy. But that's not what I mean. If it hadn't been for this investigation my cold would just be one of those colds you don't bother about, if you follow me."

Judge Comélieau's face, as he sat in his study, must have turned yellow or even green, and poor Madame Maigret was at her wits' end. She had always had such respect for persons in authority, for every sort of hierarchy.

"Let's say that here, in my own home, with my wife looking after me, I'm able to think about the investigation and direct it in peace. Nobody, or practically nobody, disturbs me—"

"Maigret!" his wife interrupted.

"Hush!"

The judge was speaking.

"Do you consider it usual that after three days this man has not yet been identified? His picture has appeared in all the papers. According to what you told me, there is a wife..."

“Yes, he told me so.”

“Let me speak, please. He has a wife, probably friends. He has neighbors, too, a landlord maybe. People have grown used to seeing him go down the street at certain times. Now nobody has yet appeared to identify him or report his disappearance. It’s true that not everybody knows the way to Boulevard Richard Lenoir.”

Poor Boulevard Richard Lenoir! Why the devil did it have such a bad reputation? Admittedly, it led into the Place de la Bastille. Admittedly, it was surrounded by narrow crowded streets. And the district itself was full of workshops and warehouses. But the boulevard itself was broad, and even had a strip of grass growing down the middle. It was true that this grass grew above the métro, whose vent holes here and there emitted warm air and a smell of disinfectant, and that every two minutes, as the trains passed, a strange shudder ran through the houses.

It was a question of habit. A hundred times, during the past thirty years, friends and colleagues had found him some apartment in what they called more cheerful districts. He had been to visit these. He had mumbled:

“It’s nice, of course...”

“And what a view, Maigret!”

“Yes...”

“The rooms are large and bright.”

“Yes... it’s perfect... I’d be delighted to live here, only...”

He would take his time, and then shake his head with a sigh.

“... it would mean moving.”

Too bad for those who didn’t like Boulevard Richard Lenoir. Too bad for Judge Comélieau.

“Tell me, Judge, did you ever happen to push a dried pea up your nose?”

“What?”

“What I said: a little dried pea. I remember we used to do that when I was a child. Try it, then look at yourself in the mirror. You’ll be surprised at the result. I bet that with a pea up one of your nostrils you can go past people who see you every day and they won’t recognize you. There’s nothing changes the look of a face so much. And it’s just the people who are the most used to us who are the most baffled by the slightest change.

“Now as you know, our man’s face was far more drastically distorted than by a little pea up the nose.

“There’s another point. People find it hard to imagine that their next-door neighbor, or their office colleague, or the waiter who serves their lunch every day might suddenly become a different person, might have turned into a murderer, or his victim, for instance. They read of crimes in the newspaper, and think of them as taking place in a different world, in a different sphere. Not in their own street. Not in their own house.”

“In short, you find it normal that nobody should have recognized him yet?”

“It doesn’t surprise me particularly. I can remember the case of a drowned woman who wasn’t identified for six months. And that was in the days of the old morgue, before refrigeration existed, when there was only a trickle of cold water from a faucet running over each corpse!”

Madame Maigret, with a sigh, gave up hope of getting him to keep quiet...

“In short, you’re satisfied. A man has been killed and, after three days, not only have we no trace of the murderer but we know nothing about the victim.”

“I know lots of small things, Judge.”

“So small, no doubt, that they’re not worth telling me about, although I am in charge of the examination.”

“Take this, for instance. The man was sort of a dandy. He may not have had much taste, but he was proud of his appearance, as you can see from his socks and tie. Now, with

gray trousers and a gabardine raincoat, he wore very lightweight shoes of black kid leather.”

“Very interesting indeed!”

“Yes, it is very interesting. Particularly because he also wore a white shirt. Wouldn’t you have expected a man who liked mauve socks and flowered ties to prefer a colored shirt, or at least a striped or patterned one? Go into a bistro like those he led us to, that seem to have been his hangouts. You won’t see many all-white shirts there.”

“From which you conclude?”

“Just a minute. In at least two of these bistros—Torrence went back to check—he ordered a Suze-citron as if he was used to it.”

“So we know his taste in apéritif si”

“Have you ever drunk Suze, Judge? It’s bitter, with a fairly low alcohol content. It’s not one of the commonest apéritifs, and I’ve noticed that the people who take to it are usually not those who drink for the kick they get from an apéritif, but who go there for professional reasons, traveling salesmen for instance, who are always having drinks bought for them.”

“From which you deduce that the dead man was a traveling salesman?”

“No.”

“Well, then?”

“Just a minute. Five or six people saw him, and we’ve got their statements. None of them gives us a detailed description of him. Most of them speak of a little man who waved his arms around. I almost forgot one detail that Moers discovered this morning. Moers is a conscientious fellow. He’s never satisfied with what he’s done, and he goes back over it of his own accord. Well! Moers has just discovered that the dead man walked splayfooted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Flatfooted, turned outward, if you prefer.”

He signaled to Madame Maigret to fill his pipe for him, and watched the operation out of the corner of his eye, enjoining her with gestures not to pack the tobacco too tightly.

“I was talking about the descriptions we have of him. They are vague, and yet two people out of five have the same impression. ‘I’m not sure...’ the proprietor of the Caves du Beaujolais told me. ‘It’s vague... and yet he reminds me of something... But what?’ Now he’s not a movie actor or even a bit player. I’ve sent a detective around the studios. He’s not a politician, or a judge...”

“Maigret!” his wife exclaimed.

Without interrupting his remarks, he lit his pipe, puffing at it between his words.

“Ask yourself, Judge, what profession could these details fit?”

“I don’t like parlor games.”

“When one’s housebound, you know, one has time to reflect. I was forgetting the most important thing. Of course we’ve made inquiries in a number of circles—football fans and the cycle-racing crowd, for instance, with no results. I’ve also had all the P.-M.-U. lessees questioned.”

“What did you say?”

“The *Pari-Mutuel-Urbain* ... betting shops... you know those cafés where you can bet on races without having to go to them... I don’t know why, I could picture my man hanging out in betting shops... That was equally unproductive.”

He was being angelically patient. He seemed to be deliberately drawing out this telephone conversation.

“On the other hand, at the races, Lucas was luckier... it took a long time... it can hardly be described as formal identification... because of the facial alteration, of course. And don’t forget that one’s much more used to seeing people alive than dead, and that being transformed into a corpse alters a man’s appearance a lot... All the same, at the race track, a few people remembered him... He used to frequent the public

enclosures, not the paddock... According to a tipster, he was quite a regular..."

"And yet this was not enough to enable you to identify him?"

"No. But taken with all the rest, all I've been telling you, it allows me to say, almost with certainty, that he was in the drinks business."

"The drinks business?"

"That's the accepted term, Judge. It includes café waiters, bottle washers, barmen, even café proprietors. It's a professional term for everyone concerned with drink, as opposed to food. Notice that all café waiters look alike. I don't mean they are really alike, but there's a sort of family resemblance about them. One often has the impression of recognizing a waiter one's never seen before.

"Most of them have sensitive feet, which is easily understandable. Look at their feet. They wear soft, light shoes, almost slippers. You'll never see a café waiter or a maître d'hôtel wearing thick-soled sports shoes. And they're used to wearing white shirts because of their profession. I'm not claiming that it's invariable, but a lot of them walk splayfooted.

"And for some reason that escapes me, café waiters have a real liking for horse races, and many of them who work early in the morning or at night often go out to the track."

"In short, you conclude that our man was a café waiter."

"No. That's just the point."

"Then I don't follow."

"He was in the drinks business, but he wasn't a café waiter. I've been thinking about it for hours, while I dozed."

To the judge, who was like a figure carved out of a block of ice, these remarks must have been a dreadful shock.

"All that I've been telling you about café waiters, in fact, applies equally to the owners of bistros. Don't accuse me of vanity, but I've always had the impression that my dead man

was not an employee, but somebody running his own business. That's why at eleven o'clock this morning I called up Moers. Technical Branch still has the man's shirt. I couldn't remember exactly what state it was in. He examined it again. Notice that luck was on our side, because it might have been a new shirt. Everyone puts on a new shirt sometime. This one happens not to be. It's even worn at the collar."

"I suppose café proprietors wear out the collars of their shirts?"

"No, Judge, no more than other people. But they don't wear out the cuffs. I'm referring to small working-class cafés, not the American bars of the Opéra and Champs Elysées districts. A bartender, who has to keep dipping his hands into water and ice, always has his sleeves rolled up. Now Moers confirmed that the shirt, which is worn almost threadbare at the collar, shows no trace of wear at the cuffs."

To Madame Maigret's horror he was now speaking with an air of profound conviction.

"Add to this the *brandade*..."

"Is that a special addiction among the proprietors of small cafés?"

"No, Judge. But Paris is full of little bars where they serve meals to a few customers. No tablecloths, you know, just the bare table. It's often the proprietor's wife who does the cooking. There's only one main dish, the *plat du jour*. In such bars, they're liable to have slack periods, and the proprietor is free for a while in the afternoon. That's why, ever since this morning, two detectives have been covering all the districts in Paris, starting with the Hôtel de Ville and the Bastille districts. Remember that our man kept to that neighborhood. You'll always find a Parisian sticking fanatically to his own district, as if that were the only place he feels safe."

"Are you hoping for a quick solution?"

"I'm hoping for a solution sooner or later. Let's see, have I told you everything? I still have to mention the spot of paint."

"What spot of paint?"

“On the seat of the trousers. It was Moers, as usual, who discovered it, although it’s barely visible. He says it’s fresh paint, says that it must have been applied to some article of furniture three or four days ago. I had inquiries made in various railway stations, beginning with the Gare de Lyon.”

“Why the Gare de Lyon?”

“Because it’s the continuation of the Bastille district, as it were.”

“And why a railroad station?”

Maigret sighed. Good heavens, how long it all took to explain! And how lacking in the most elementary sense of reality an examining magistrate can be! How can people who have never set foot in a bistro or a betting shop, or the enclosure of a race track, and who don’t know the meaning of the term “in the drinks business,” claim to be able to understand the criminal’s mind?

“You must have my report in front of you.”

“I have read it over several times.”

“When I got the first phone call at eleven o’clock Wednesday morning, the man had already had somebody after him for a long time, at least since the previous day. He hadn’t thought of telling the police at first. He hoped to cope with things himself. But he was already scared. He knew his life was in danger. So he had to try and avoid deserted places. The crowd was his safeguard. He didn’t dare go home, either, for fear of being followed and attacked there. Even in Paris there are not many places that stay open all night. Apart from Montmartre cabarets, there are railroad stations, which are well lighted, and where the waiting rooms are never empty. Well, the seats in the third-class waiting room in the Gare de Lyon were painted Monday. Moers says the paint is identical with that on the man’s trousers.”

“Has the station staff been questioned?”

“Yes, and that’s still going on, Judge.”

“In short, you’ve got a few results in spite of everything.”

“In spite of everything. I also know at what point our man changed his mind.”

“Changed his mind about what?”

Madame Maigret was pouring her husband a cup of herb tea and making signs to him to drink it while it was hot.

“At first, as I’ve just told you, he hoped to cope with things himself. Then on Wednesday morning it occurred to him to call me. He went on doing so until four o’clock in the afternoon or thereabouts. What happened then? I don’t know. Maybe after sending us his last S. O. S. from the post office on the Faubourg St. Denis, he thought it was no use. The fact remains that an hour or so later, about five o’clock, he went into a *brasserie* on Rue St. Antoine.”

“Has a witness come forward at last, then?”

“No, Judge. It was Janvier who unearthed him, by showing the photograph in every café and questioning all the waiters. The man ordered a Suze—and this detail implies that there’s no likelihood of mistaken identity—and he asked for an envelope. Not writing paper, just an envelope. Then, while he put it into his pocket, he rushed to the phone booth after he got a token from the cashier. He made his call. The cashier heard the click.”

“And you never got the call?”

“No,” admitted Maigret almost resentfully. “It wasn’t for us. He was trying somebody else, don’t you see? As for the yellow car...”

“Have you any news of that?”

“Vague, but it fits. You know the Quai Henri IV?”

“Toward the Bastille district?”

“Yes. You see, it all happens in the same area, so you feel you’re going around in a circle. The Quai Henri IV is one of the quietest, the least busy in all of Paris. There are no shops or bars there, only middle-class houses. It was a telegraph boy who saw the yellow car, on Wednesday, at eight-ten precisely. He noticed it because it had broken down in front of Number

Sixty-three, where he had a telegram to deliver. Two men were bending over the open hood.”

“Did he give you a description?”

“No. It was dark.”

“Did he get the license number?”

“No, he didn’t do that, either. It’s not often, Judge, that people think of taking the numbers of the cars they see. What is important is that the car was facing down the Pont d’Austerlitz. And also that it was ten minutes past eight, in view of the fact that we know from the post mortem that the crime was committed between eight and ten o’clock.”

“Do you think you will soon be well enough to go out?”

The judge had somewhat relented, but seemed loath to give up.

“I don’t know.”

“What line are you pursuing now?”

“I’m not pursuing any line. I’m waiting. That’s the only thing to do, isn’t it? We’ve reached a deadlock. We’ve done — or rather my men have done all they could. There’s nothing to do now but wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“For anything. Whatever turns up. Perhaps a witness? Perhaps a fresh fact?”

“You think it will be forthcoming?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“Thank you. I will report our conversation to the Director of Prosecutions.”

“Please give him my respects.”

“I hope your health improves, Chief Inspector.”

“Many thanks, Judge.”

When he hung up, he was as grave as an owl. He was looking out of the corner of his eye at Madame Maigret, who

had picked up her knitting again, and in whom he could sense a vague uneasiness.

“Don’t you think you went too far?”

“Too far in what?”

“Admit that you were pulling his leg.”

“Not in the least.”

“You never stopped making fun of him.”

“Do you think so?”

And he seemed genuinely surprised. For he had really spoken in all seriousness. Everything he had said was quite true, including his doubts as to his own illness. It happened from time to time, when an investigation was not going as it should, that he would go to bed or stay indoors. His wife would baby him. She would walk around on tiptoe. He escaped the bustle and noise of Headquarters, the endless questions, and all the daily worries. His colleagues came to visit him or telephoned. Everybody was very patient with him. They inquired after his health, and in exchange for a certain number of herb teas, which he drank with a grimace, he got his solicitous wife to brew him a few hot toddies.

It was true that he had certain things in common with his dead man. Basically—it suddenly struck him—what he dreaded was not so much the actual house moving as the change of scene. The thought of no longer seeing the words “Lhoste and Pépin” as soon as he woke up, of no longer making the same journey every morning, usually on foot...

Each belonged to his own district, the dead man and he. And he was pleased to have realized this. He knocked out his pipe and filled another.

“Do you really believe the man was a café owner?”

“I may have exaggerated a tiny bit by seeming so sure of it, but since I’ve said so I want it to be true. It all holds together, you know.”

“What holds together?”

“Everything I said. To begin with, I didn’t think I should talk so much. I found myself improvising. Then I felt that it all fitted in. I went on.”

“And suppose he’d been a cobbler or a tailor?”

“Dr. Paul would have told me. So would Moers.”

“How could they have known?”

“The doctor would have found out by studying the hands, the callouses, the deformities; Moers, from the dust he’d have found in the clothes.”

“And suppose he’d been anything other than a café owner?”

“Too bad, then! Pass me my book.”

It was yet another habit of his, when he was unwell, to bury himself in a novel by Alexandre Dumas; he had the complete works in an old popular edition with yellowed pages and romantic illustrations, and the mere smell of those books brought back to him all the minor illnesses of his life.

He could hear the purring of the stove and the click of knitting needles. When he raised his eyes he could see the copper pendulum of the clock swinging to and fro in its dark oak case.

“You’d better take another aspirin.”

“All right.”

“Why do you think he called someone else?”

Madame Maigret, good soul, was very anxious to help him. Usually she did not venture to ask any questions about his professional activities—merely inquiring when he was likely to be back and want his meals—but when he was unwell and she saw him working, she could not help worrying a little. In her heart of hearts, she must have thought he was not in earnest.

At Police Headquarters no doubt he behaved quite differently, acting and speaking like a real inspector!

That conversation with Judge Comélieau—of all people! —worried her, and it was obvious that she could not stop

thinking about it, while her lips moved silently, counting her stitches.

“Maigret...”

He raised his head unwillingly, for he was deep in his book.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand. You said, when you were talking about the Gare de Lyon, that he hadn’t dared go home because the man would have followed him there.”

“Yes, I probably said that.”

“Yesterday you told me he must have changed his jacket.”

“Yes. What about it?”

“And you’ve just implied to the judge that he ate the *brandade* in his own restaurant. So he must have gone back there. So he couldn’t have been afraid of being followed home.”

Had Maigret really thought of that already? Or did he reply on the spur of the moment?

“It all hangs together.”

“Really?”

“He was at the station on Tuesday night. He hadn’t yet phoned me. He was hoping to get away from his pursuer.”

“And next day? Do you think he was no longer being followed?”

“Possibly. Probably. But, I also said that he had changed his mind, around five o’clock. Don’t forget that he made a phone call and asked for an envelope.”

“Of course...”

She was not convinced, but she said with a sigh:

“You’re probably right.”

Silence. From time to time a page turned over, and the sock in Madame Maigret’s lap grew a trifle longer.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Without raising his head he said:

“Tell me!”

“It’s nothing... it doesn’t mean anything... I was just thinking that he must have made a mistake, since they killed him all the same...”

“A mistake in what way?”

“In going home. I’m sorry. You go on reading...”

But he was no longer reading, at any rate attentively, for it was he who looked up first.

“You’re forgetting the breakdown!” he said.

And it seemed to him that a new way out had suddenly appeared, that a crack had occurred through which he was going to glimpse the truth.

“What we want to know is exactly how long the yellow car was out of order.”

He was no longer speaking to her, but to himself; she knew it and took care not to interrupt him again.

“A breakdown is unforeseeable, an accident, something that by definition upsets prearranged plans. So things didn’t happen as they were meant to.”

He gave his wife an odd look. It was she, finally, who put him on the right track.

“Supposing he died because of the breakdown?”

Suddenly he closed his book, leaving it on his knees, reached out to the telephone, and dialed Headquarters’ number.

“Give me Lucas. If he’s not in his office you’ll find him in mine... Is that you, Lucas?... What’s that?... Something new?... Just a minute...”

He wanted to speak first, for fear of being told the very thing he had just discovered for himself.

“Send somebody over to the Quai Henri IV, Eriau or Dubonnet if they’re handy. Get them to question all the concierges and tenants, not only at Number Sixty-three and the

next-door houses, but in every block of apartments. The quay's not that long. Someone's bound to have noticed the yellow car. I want to know as exactly as possible what time it broke down and what time it left again. Wait! Something more. The drivers may have needed a spare part. There must be some garages in the neighborhood. Have them checked too. That's all for the moment. Your turn now!"

"Hold it a minute, Chief. I'm going into another room."

That meant Lucas was not alone and did not want to speak in front of the person who was with him.

"Hello!... Good! I didn't want her to hear me. It's still about that car. An old woman turned up half an hour ago, and I saw her in your office. She strikes me as a little crazy..."

That was inevitable. Any investigation that has had publicity eventually brings all the lunatics in Paris to Police Headquarters. .

"She lives on the Quai de Charenton, a little beyond the Bercy warehouses."

That reminded Maigret of an investigation he had made a few years earlier in a strange little house in that district. He recalled the Quai de Bercy, with the iron grille of the warehouse on the left, the tall trees, the stone parapet of the Seine on the right. Then, beyond a bridge whose name he had forgotten, the quay widened out, with a row of one-or two-story villas along one side which were more suggestive of the suburbs than of the city. There was always a whole fleet of barges at that spot, and Maigret recalled the harbor covered with barrels as far as the eye could reach.

"What does she do, this old woman of yours?"

"Well, that's the snag. She's a fortuneteller and clairvoyant."

"Hmm."

"Yes, that's what I thought too. She talks an awful lot, stares into your eyes and embarrasses you. At first she swore to me that she never read the papers, and she tried to make me believe she didn't need to, because she only had to go into a trance to know all about current events."

“Did you push her a little?”

“Yes. She finally admitted she might have cast her eye on a paper left by one of her clients.”

“So then?”

“She read the description of the yellow car. She said she saw it Wednesday night, less than a hundred yards from where she lives.”

“What time?”

“About nine.”

“Did she see the occupants too?”

“She saw two men go into a house.”

“Can she identify the house?”

“It’s a small café at the corner of the embankment and some street or other. It’s called Au Petit Albert.”

Maigret gripped the stem of his pipe tightly between his teeth and avoided looking at Madame Maigret, for fear of betraying the gleam of excitement in his eyes. “Is that all?”

“That’s about all she had to tell. Even then she talked for half an hour at full speed. Maybe you’d better see her.”

“I will!”

“Shall I bring her over?”

“Just a minute. Does she know how long the car stayed in front of the Petit Albert?”

“About half an hour.”

“Did it drive off toward town?”

“No. It went along the quay toward Charenton.”

“Was any bundle taken out from the house to the car? You understand what I mean?”

“No. The old woman is certain, she says, that the men weren’t carrying anything. That’s just what’s bothering me. There’s the question of the time, too. I wonder what they could have done with the corpse between nine and one. They can’t

have gone for a ride in the country. Shall I bring the old bird along?"

"Yes. Take a taxi and hold onto it. Bring a sergeant with you. He can wait downstairs with the old lady."

"Are you going to come out?"

"Yes."

"Your bronchitis?"

Lucas was tactful; instead of cold, he said bronchitis, which sounded more serious.

"Don't worry about that."

Madame Maigret was beginning to wriggle on her chair and to open her mouth.

"Warn the sergeant not to let her get away when you come upstairs. Some people are liable to change their minds all of a sudden."

"I don't think that's the case with her. She wants to have her picture in the paper, with all her titles and qualifications. She asked me where the photographers were."

"Have her photographed before she goes. That'll make her happy."

He hung up, looked at Madame Maigret with gentle irony, then glanced at his Alexandre Dumas, which he had not finished, which he would surely not finish this time, which would have to wait until his next illness. He cast a glance, too, but a disdainful one, at the cup of herb tea.

"Back to the job!" he remarked, getting up and going over to the cupboard, where he picked up the bottle of calvados and a small, gold-rimmed glass.

"It was hardly worth stuffing you with aspirin to make you sweat!"

FOUR

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Newcomers to Police Headquarters invariably have to listen to a number of traditional stories that tell of certain famous endurance tests. One in particular, which Maigret underwent some fifteen years earlier. It had been in the late autumn, at the worst time of year, particularly in Normandy, where a lowering leaden sky made the days seem even shorter. For three whole days and two whole nights, the inspector had remained glued to a garden gate on a deserted road in the neighborhood of Fécamp, waiting for a man to come out of the villa across the way. There was no other house within sight. Nothing but fields. Even the cows had gone in. He would have had to walk two miles to find a telephone and ask to be relieved. Nobody knew he was there. He himself had not foreseen that he would be there.

For three days and two nights it had poured with rain, a frozen rain that ended by soaking the tobacco in his pipe. The only passers-by had been three peasants in sabots who had glanced at him suspiciously and hurried on. Maigret had had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and worst of all, by the end of the second day, he had no more matches for his pipe.

Lucas had a story to his credit, known as the Tale of the Crippled Blockhead. In order to keep watch on a small private house—it was at the corner of Rue de Birague, near the Place des Vosges—he had been installed in a room opposite it, disguised as a paralyzed old man in a wheel chair whom, every morning, a nurse pushed in front of the window, where he stayed all day. His face was framed by a fine spreading beard and he was fed with a spoon. This had gone on for ten days, by the end of which he had practically lost the use of his legs.

Maigret recalled these stories and a few more like them that night, and he had a presentiment that the endurance test that was about to begin would be equally famous, and would make as good a story, in any case, from his point of view.

It was almost like a game, in which he took part with the utmost seriousness. About seven o'clock, for instance, just as Lucas was about to leave, he had said to him quite naturally:

"What'll you drink?"

The shutters of the café were closed, as he had pictured them. The lamps were on. The atmosphere around them was that of any small tavern after closing time, when the tables have been straightened and sawdust sprinkled on the floor.

Maigret had gone to get glasses.

"Picon-grenadine? Cassis?"

"Cassis."

And as though to identify himself still further with the proprietor, he had poured himself a Suze.

"Who can you think of, who'd be right for the job?"

"There's Chevrier. His parents used to keep a hotel at Moret sur Loing, and he helped them till he did his military service."

"Get in touch with him right away so he'll be ready. Here's to you! He'll have to get hold of a woman who can cook."

"He'll manage that."

"Another vermouth?"

"No, thanks. I'm going."

"Send Moers here right away. Ask him to bring his equipment."

And Maigret watched him leave, and stood for a moment looking out at the deserted quayside, the casks standing in rows, the barges moored for the night.

It was the sort of small café of which so many are to be seen, not in Paris itself, but on its outskirts, a real picture-postcard café. The house stood at a street corner and was only two stories high, with a red-tiled roof, and yellow-washed walls on which was written in big brown letters: "Au Petit Albert." And on either side of this, with naïve flourishes: "Drinks—Refreshments."

In the yard behind, in a lean-to, the chief inspector had found some green tubs with bushes in them which presumably, in summer, were set out on the pavement to form a terrace with two or three tables.

Now he was in possession of the empty house. As there had been no fire there for several days, the air was cold and damp, and several times Maigret glanced toward the big stove that stood in the middle of the café, with its black, gleaming chimney soaring up before it disappeared into the wall.

Why not, after all, since there was a scuttle almost full of coal? In the same shed in the yard, he discovered some firewood, a hatchet, and a chopping block. There were some old newspapers in a corner of the kitchen.

A few minutes later the fire was crackling, and the chief inspector had taken up his stand in front of the stove with his hands behind his back, in an attitude that was habitual with him.

Actually, that old woman of Lucas's had not been as crazy as all that. They had gone to her house. In the taxi she had talked nonstop all the way, sometimes glancing slyly at her companions to find out what impression she was making on them.

Her house was less than a hundred yards away, another little two-story cottage with a small garden. Maigret had wondered how, being inevitably on the same side of the quay, she had been able to see what was happening on the sidewalk some distance away, particularly since night had fallen.

"Did you stay all that time on the sidewalk?"

"No."

"In your doorway?"

"I was inside my house."

She was right. The living room, which was extraordinarily neat and clean, had not only windows overlooking the street, but also a side window through which could be seen a large section of the quay, over toward the Petit Albert. As there were

no shutters, it was natural that the lights of a stationary car should have attracted the old woman's attention.

"Were you alone in the house?"

"Madame Chauffier was with me."

A midwife who lived one block away. This had been checked and confirmed. The house, contrary to what might have been expected from the old woman's appearance, was much like any house in which a woman lives by herself. There was none of that bric-a-brac with which fortunetellers like to surround themselves. On the contrary, the light-colored furniture obviously came from a popular store on Boulevard Barbes, and the floor was covered with yellow linoleum.

"It was bound to happen," she was saying. "Did you read what he's got written on the front of his café? Either he's an initiate, or else he's committed a sacrilege."

She had put some water on to boil to make coffee. She was determined to offer Maigret a cup. She explained that Albertus Parvus was a book of magic dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

"But what if his name really is Albert? And what if he really is a little man?"

"He's a little man, I know. I've often seen him. That's not a good enough reason. There are some things that one doesn't dare make a joke of."

About Albert's wife she said:

"A big dark girl, sort of a slut. I wouldn't like to eat what she cooked, and she always smelled of garlic."

"How long have the shutters been closed?"

"I don't know. The day after I'd seen the car I was in bed with the flu. When I got up again the café was closed, and I thought, Good riddance."

"Was it noisy?"

"No. Hardly anybody went there. Wait, the men who're working with the crane you see down on the quay used to go

there for lunch. And a man from Cess, the wine merchants. Some bargemen used to drop in for a drink.”

She had insisted on knowing in which papers her picture would appear.

“Above all, they’re not to say that I do fortunetelling with cards. That would be like saying you were a policeman.”

“I wouldn’t be offended.”

“But it would damage my reputation.”

Well, he’d finished with the old woman. He had drunk his coffee. Lucas and he had gone to the house at the corner. Lucas had mechanically turned the handle of the door, and it had opened.

The odd thing was that this little bistro had stood unlocked for at least four days and appeared intact, with its bottles on the bar and money in the till.

The walls were painted brown to about a yard above the floor and light green above that; they were hung with advertisers’ calendars like those found in all country inns.

So “Little Albert” was not such a Parisian after all, or rather, like most Parisians, he had retained certain countrified tastes. It was evident that he had fixed up his café to please himself, with a kind of affection, and the equivalent could have been found in any French village.

Upstairs the bedrooms were like that too. For Maigret, hands in pockets, had been over the whole house. Lucas had followed him with some amusement, for the inspector, who had taken off his coat and hat, seemed really to be taking possession of a new dwelling. In less than half an hour he had become completely at home there, and from time to time he would go and take up his stand behind the bar.

“There’s one thing certain, Nine isn’t here.”

They had hunted for her from cellar to attic, and had also searched the courtyard, and the little garden that was full of old boxes and empty bottles.

“What do you think about it, Lucas?”

“I don’t know, Chief.”

There were only eight tables in the café, four along one wall, two opposite and the last two in the middle of the room, close to the stove. It was one of these that the two men scrutinized from time to time, because the sawdust at the foot of one of the chairs had been carefully swept. Why, if not to cover traces of blood?

But who had cleared away the victim’s dinner and washed the dishes and the glasses?

“Maybe they came back later?” suggested Lucas.

In any case there was one curious detail. Whereas everything was tidy around the house, one bottle, and one alone, stood uncorked on the bar, and Maigret had been careful not to touch it. It was a bottle of brandy, and presumably the man, or men, who had helped themselves to it had done without glasses and had drunk straight from the bottle.

The unknown visitors had gone upstairs. They had searched all the drawers, and then closed them, leaving the linen and other objects tumbled around.

The oddest thing was that two frames on the bedroom wall, which must have held photographs, were empty.

It was obviously not little Albert’s portrait that they had tried to get rid of, for there was one on the chest of drawers, a round, cheerful face, with a lock on his forehead, looking like a clown, as he had been described by the proprietor of the Caves du Beaujolais.

A taxi drew up. Steps were heard on the sidewalk. Maigret went to draw the bolt.

“Come in,” he said to Moers, who was carrying a fairly heavy case. “Have you had dinner? No? Will you have a drink?”

The evening and the night that followed were among the strangest he had ever experienced. From time to time he went to watch Moers, who had undertaken a long and exacting task, searching for the minutest fingerprints everywhere, first in the

café, then in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in every room in the house.

“The person who picked up this bottle first was wearing gloves,” he was able to say definitely.

He had also collected samples of sawdust from the floor, close to the table by the stove. And Maigret had found some remains of salt cod in the garbage pail.

A few hours earlier the dead man had still had no name and his image, in Maigret’s mind, was dim. But now, not only did they have his photograph, but the inspector was living in his house, among his furniture, examining clothes that had belonged to him, handling his personal possessions.

Not without a certain satisfaction he had pointed out to Lucas, as soon as they arrived, a garment hanging on a coatrack in the bedroom: it was a jacket of the same material as the dead man’s trousers.

In other words, he had been right. Albert had gone home and changed as usual.

“Moers, my boy, do you think it’s a long time since anyone was in here?”

“I’d say somebody came in today,” the young man answered, after examining traces of alcohol on the bar, beside the uncorked bottle.

It was quite possible. The house was open for anyone to come in, but passers-by would not have known. When people see closed shutters, they seldom think of turning the door handle to see if the door is shut or not.

“They’ve been looking for something, eh?”

“That’s what I think too.”

Something not very bulky, presumably a paper, for they had even opened a tiny cardboard box that had held earrings.

Moers and Maigret had eaten an odd sort of dinner together in the café. Maigret had acted as waiter. In the pantry he had found some sausage, cans of sardines, and Dutch cheese. He had gone into the cellar to draw wine from the cask, a thick,

bluish wine. There were corked bottles, but he had not touched them.

“Are you staying on, Chief?”

“Why, yes. I don’t suppose anyone will come tonight, but I don’t want to go home.”

“Would you like me to stay with you?”

“No, thanks, Moers. I’d rather you left and got your analyses done.”

Moers neglected nothing, not even a tangle of woman’s hair in a comb on the dressing table upstairs. There were not many sounds to be heard outside. Few people went by. From time to time, especially after midnight, the clatter of a truck driving in from the outskirts toward Les Halles.

Maigret had called his wife.

“Are you sure you’re not going to catch more cold?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve lit a fire. Later I’m going to make myself a hot toddy.”

“You won’t get any sleep.”

“Yes, I will. I have the choice between a bed and a chaise longue.”

“Are the sheets clean?”

“There are clean ones in the cupboard on the landing.”

He did, in fact, consider making up the bed with clean sheets and lying down in it. On reflection, however, he chose the chaise longue.

Moers left about one in the morning. Maigret filled the stove up to the brim, fixed himself a stiff grog, made sure that everything was in order, and, after bolting the door, climbed the winding staircase with the ponderous step of a man who is going to bed.

There was a dressing gown in the wardrobe, a blue flannel dressing gown with revers of artificial silk, but it was far too

short and narrow for him. The slippers at the foot of the bed were not his size either.

He kept on his socks, wrapped a blanket around him, and settled down on the chaise longue, a pillow behind his head. The second-floor windows had no shutters. The light from a gas light filtered through elaborately patterned curtains and made arabesques on the walls.

He looked at these through half-closed eyes, smoking his last pipe in little puffs. He was getting used to things. He was trying on the house, like a new garment, and the smell of it was already becoming familiar to him, a sour-sweet smell that reminded him of country life.

Why had Nine's photographs been removed? Why had she disappeared, deserting the house, not even taking the money out of the till? Admittedly, there was barely a hundred francs in it. Probably Albert kept his money elsewhere, and somebody had made a clean sweep of it, as of his personal papers.

The strange thing was that this meticulous search of the house had not been carried out in a rough, disorderly fashion. The clothes had been disturbed but not taken off their hangers. The frames had been emptied of their photographs but hung back on their hooks.

Maigret fell asleep, and when he heard a rapping against the shutters downstairs, he could have sworn he had only dozed off for a few minutes.

And yet it was seven o'clock in the morning. It was broad daylight. The sun was shining over the Seine, where barges were starting out and tugs whistling.

He slipped on his shoes without tying them and went downstairs, his hair untidy, his collar unfastened, and his jacket rumpled.

It was Chevrier, with a pretty young woman in a navy-blue suit, a little red hat on her tousled hair.

"Here we are, Chief."

Chevrier had been at Headquarters only three or four years. Despite his name he reminded one less of a goat than of a sheep, so soft and gentle were all the lines of his face and figure. The woman was tugging at his sleeve. He understood and mumbled:

“I’m sorry! Chief Inspector, may I introduce my wife?”

“You needn’t worry,” she said bravely. “I know the job. My mother used to keep our village inn, and sometimes, with only two women to help us out, we handled wedding breakfasts for fifty guests or more.”

She walked straight to the percolator and said to her husband:

“Give me your matches.”

The gas popped on and a few minutes later the smell of coffee pervaded the house.

Chevrier had been careful to put on black trousers and a white shirt. He had dressed for the part, and he took up his post behind the bar and began shifting things around.

“Shall we open up?”

“Yes. It must be time.” ‘

“Who’s going to do the shopping?” his wife asked.

“In a little while you can take a taxi and go to the nearest store.”

“Fricandeau of veal with sorrel, will that suit you?”

She had brought along a white apron. She was very cheerful and lively. It was starting off like a game or a picnic.

“You can open the shutters,” the inspector announced. “If customers ask any questions, tell them you’re acting as substitutes.”

He went up into the bedroom, found a razor, shaving cream, and a brush. Why not, after all? Little Albert seemed to have been clean and healthy.

He quietly completed his toilet, and when he came down, Chevrier's wife had already left to do her shopping. Two men were leaning on the counter, two bargemen, drinking laced coffee. They were quite unconcerned as to who was keeping the bistro. Probably they were only passing through. They were talking about a lock that had almost been staved in by a tug the day before.

"What can I give you, Chief?"

Maigret preferred to help himself. After all, it was the first time in his life that he had stood behind a bar pouring himself rum from the bottle. He suddenly burst out laughing.

"I'm thinking of Judge Comélieu," he explained.

He tried to imagine the judge coming into the Petit Albert and finding the chief inspector on the other side of the bar with one of his detectives.

And yet, if anything were to be learned, this was the only way to do it. Surely the men who had killed the landlord would be puzzled at seeing the bar open as usual.

And Nine, if Nine were still in existence?

About nine o'clock the old clairvoyant came by; she walked back and forth in front of the café, even pressing her face against the window, and finally left talking to herself, with a shopping bag in her hand.

Madame Maigret called to get news of her husband.

"Can I bring you anything? Your toothbrush, for instance?"

"No, thanks. I've sent out for one."

"The judge called."

"You didn't give him my number, I hope."

"No. I only said you'd been out since yesterday afternoon."

Chevrier's wife alighted from a taxi from which she extracted baskets full of vegetables and parcels. When Maigret addressed her as "madame," she retorted:

“Call me Irma. You’ll see the customers’ll call me that right away. The chief inspector can, can’t he, Emile?”

Not many people came in. Three laborers who were working on some scaffolding in the next street dropped in for their break. They brought their own bread and sausage and ordered two liters of red wine.

“Good thing you’re open again! We had to make a ten-minute walk for a drink!”

They were undisturbed at seeing new faces.

“Has the other guy retired?”

One of them declared:

“He was all right!”

“Did you know him long?”

“Only the last couple of weeks, since we’ve been working in the neighborhood. You know, we’re used to getting our meals all over the place.”

They were slightly intrigued, however, by Maigret, whom they saw prowling about the house.

“Who’s he? He doesn’t look as if he belonged here.”

And Chevrier replied with a guileless air:

“Ssh! My father-in-law...”

Things were simmering on the kitchen stove. The house was coming alive. Thin sunlight crept in through the broad bay windows of the café. Chevrier, his sleeves rolled up and kept in place with rubber bands, had swept the sawdust.

The telephone.

“It’s for you, Chief. Moers.”

Poor Moers had not slept all night. He had not had much luck in the fingerprint line. There were prints of all sorts, on the bottles and on the furniture. Most of them were already old and were superimposed in confusion. The clearest, which he had passed on to the Fingerprint Department, corresponded to nothing in the records.

“They’ve worked in rubber gloves all over the house. There’s only one thing that’s given a positive result—the sawdust. On analysis I found traces of blood.”

“Human blood?”

“I’ll know that in an hour. But I’m almost certain of it.”

Lucas, who had done his share of work that morning, arrived about eleven, very sprightly and wearing, Maigret noticed, a bright tie.

“One export-cassie!” he called out with a wink to his colleague Chevrier.

Irma had hung up on the door a slate on which she had written in chalk: “Special today: Fricandean of veal with sorrel.”

They could hear her coming and going busily, and she would probably not have given up her job for anything in the world.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Maigret said to Lucas.

They sat in the bedroom, beside the window, which the mild weather had allowed them to open. The crane was working on the riverbank, extracting casks from the belly of a barge. Whistles sounded, chains creaked, and on the shimmering water there was a ceaseless stream of busy, panting tugs.

“His name’s Albert Rochain. I went to the Tax Office. He took out the license four years ago.”

“Did you find out his wife’s name?”

“No. The license is in his name. I went to the town hall, but they couldn’t tell me anything there. If he was married, it must have been before he came to this neighborhood.”

“And the police station?”

“Nothing. They say the house was respectable. They never had to interfere.”

Maigret’s eyes kept reverting to the portrait of his dead man, smiling away on the chest of drawers.

“Chevrier will probably find out more from his customers.”

“Are you staying here?”

“We might have lunch downstairs together, like casual visitors. No news of Torrence and Janvier?”

“They’re still dealing with the race-track crowd.”

“If you can get them on the phone, tell them to try Vincennes particularly.”

The point at issue was still the same: the Vincennes race track was in the right neighborhood, so to speak. And Little Albert, like Maigret, was a creature of habit.

“Aren’t people surprised to see the place open?”

“Not particularly. Some of the neighbors have come to take a look from the sidewalk. They probably think Albert has sold out.”

At midday they both sat down at a table by the window, and Irma herself waited on them. A few customers were sitting at the other tables, mainly the crane operators.

“Did Albert finally strike it lucky?” one of them called out to Chevrier.

“He’s gone to the country for a while.”

“Have you taken his job? Did he take Nine with him? Maybe we’ll eat less garlic, which won’t be a bad thing! Not that I don’t like it, but it makes your breath stink.”

The man pinched Irma’s backside as she passed close to him, and Chevrier did not flinch, even enduring a quizzical look from Lucas.

“A good guy on the whole! If only he weren’t so crazy about racing... But look, if he got someone to take his job, why did he leave the house shut up for four days? Specially without letting his customers know! We had to go all the way to Charenton Bridge the first day to eat... no, baby, no Camembert for me. A *petit-suisse*, every day. And Jules here likes Roquefort...”

They were puzzled, just the same, and talked to one another in low voices. Irma, in particular, intrigued them.

“Chevrier won’t stand this for much longer,” whispered Lucas in Maigret’s ear. “He’s only been married two years. If those guys keep on letting their hands wander over his wife’s backside he’s liable to blow up.”

Things didn’t prove quite so serious. However, the sergeant declared firmly as he went to serve their drinks:

“She’s my wife.”

“Congratulations, pal... Don’t worry, we’re not choosy!”

They were roaring with laughter. They were not bad fellows, but they were aware that the proprietor was ill at ease.

“You see, Albert played it safe... no risk of anyone trying to take off with his Nine...”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you know her?”

“Never seen her.”

“You haven’t missed much, pal... She’d have been safe in a barracksful of Senegalese... She’s all right, though, isn’t she, Jules?”

“How old is she?”

“You think she’s any age in particular, Jules?”

“Not that you’d notice... thirty, maybe... or fifty... depends which side you look at her from... If it’s on the side of her good eye, she’s not too bad, but if it’s on the other...”

“Does she squint?”

“And how, pal... he wants to know if she squints!... Why, she can look at the tips of your shoes and the top of the Eiffel Tower at the same time...”

“Was Albert fond of her?”

“Well, pal, Albert was a guy that liked to take things easy. Now your old lady’s an A-I cook, there’s no denying that... but I bet it’s you that gets up at six to go to the market...”

Maybe you even gave her a hand with peeling the potatoes. And pretty soon she won't be doing the cleaning up by herself while you go and enjoy yourself at the races...

"Now with Nine, Albert never had to do a thing... Besides, she must have had some dough..."

Why did Lucas at this point cast a stealthy glance at Maigret? Hadn't this somehow spoiled the chief inspector's picture of his dead man?

The craneman went on:

"I don't know how she made it, but with her looks it sure wasn't at the game..."

Maigret was unperturbed. He even wore a faint smile on his lips. He was listening to every word of the conversation, and the words automatically became images, completing the portrait of Little Albert. And the inspector seemed to retain all his fondness for the figure that emerged so clearly.

"What part of the country do you folks come from?"

"From Berry," Irma replied.

"I'm from the Cher," said Chevrier.

"Then it wasn't back home that you got to know Albert. He was from the North... was it Tourcoing, Jules?"

"Roubaix."

"Same thing."

Maigret broke into the conversation, which seemed quite natural in so homely a café.

"Didn't he work for a while near the Gare du Nord?"

"Yes, at the Cadran. He was a waiter in the same *brasserie* for ten or twelve years before he set up here."

"That can't have been where he met Nine."

"Wherever it was, he drew it lucky. Not for fun and games, of course, but for not having to worry about things..."

"Is she from the South?"

“She sure is!”

“Marseilles?”

“Toulouse... with an accent you could cut with a knife! Puts the announcer from Radio Toulouse to shame... Check, please, baby... Say, mister, where’s your manners?”

Chevrier was frowning in perplexity. Maigret, however, had understood. He put in:

“He’s right! Drinks on the house when a new landlord takes over...”

Only seven customers in all came for lunch. One of the men from Cess, the wine merchants, a sulky-looking middle-aged man who ate in silence in a corner, who was disgusted with everything, with the cooking, because it was different, with the way the tabla was laid, with the white wine he was given instead of the red he was used to.

“It’ll get just like any other place,” he grumbled as he left. “That’s always the way...”

Chevrier was no longer enjoying himself as much as he had in the morning. Only Irma was still in high spirits as she juggled her stacks of plates, and she hummed a little tune as she started to clean up.

At half-past one only Maigret and Lucas were left in the café. The slack period had begun, during which only an occasional customer would look in, a thirsty passer-by, or a couple of bargemen waiting for their cargo to be loaded.

Maigret was puffing gently at his pipe, sprawling in his chair, for he had eaten a big meal, partly to please Irma. A sunbeam warmed one of his ears, and he seemed blissfully content, when suddenly he pressed his foot heavily on Lucas’s toes.

A man had just passed by on the sidewalk. He had peered attentively into the café, then, after a moment’s hesitation, he had turned around and come up to the door.

He was of medium height. He wore neither hat nor cap. His hair was red and he had a freckled face, blue eyes, and fleshy

lips.

He turned the handle of the door. He came in, still hesitantly, and there was something sinuous about his movements, a curious caution about his gestures.

His shoes, which were very worn, had not been polished for several days. His dark suit was threadbare, his shirt of doubtful cleanliness, his tie carelessly tied.

He reminded one of a cat making its way guardedly into an unfamiliar room, looking around and sniffing out possible danger. He was probably of lower than average intelligence. Village idiots often have the same sort of eyes, expressing nothing but instinctive cunning and mistrust.

He seemed to be puzzled by Maigret and Lucas. Suspiciously, keeping his eyes fixed on them, he edged toward the counter and rapped on it with a coin.

Chevrier, who was eating in a corner of the kitchen, came in.

“What d’you want?”

And the man hesitated once again. He seemed hoarse. He uttered a harsh sound, then gave up trying to speak and pointed at the bottle of brandy on the bar.

Now it was Chevrier he was staring at. There was something he could not make out, that was beyond his capacity to understand.

Maigret, outwardly impassive, was tapping Lucas’s foot with the tip of his own.

The scene was brief, but it seemed very long. The man hunted for money in his pocket with his left hand while, with his right, he raised the glass to his lips and emptied it at one gulp.

The brandy made him cough and brought tears to his eyes.

Then he flung a few coins on the bar and left with long, rapid strides. Once outside, he rushed off toward the Quai de Bercy, turning around to look back.

“Go after him!” Maigret said to Lucas. “But I’m afraid he’ll give you the slip.”

Lucas hurried out. The chief inspector ordered Chevrier:

“Call a taxi! Quick!”

The Quai de Bercy was long and straight, with no side streets. Perhaps, in a car, he would catch up with the man before he got away from Lucas.

FIVE

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The hotter the chase became, the stronger grew Maigret's impression that he was living through this scene for the second time. This happened to him sometimes in dreams— and those were the dreams that, even as a child, he dreaded most. He would be making his way through what was usually a complicated landscape, and suddenly he would experience the sensation of having been there before, of having made the same gestures and uttered the same words. This produced a kind of dizziness, particularly at the moment when he understood that he was living through moments of time that he had already lived through once before.

The manhunt now under way, which had started from the Quai de Charenton, was one whose devious course he had already followed once before, from his own office, when Little Albert's frantic voice had brought him hour by hour the echo of his growing anguish. Now, once again, anguish was mounting. Down the long prospect of the almost deserted Quai de Bercy, the man walking with supple strides alongside the railing would turn back from time to time, then hasten his step on seeing behind him, invariably, the short figure of Lucas.

Maigret, sitting in his taxi beside the driver, followed close behind them. What a difference between the two men! The man in front had something of an animal's gaze, and an animal's way of walking. His movements, even when he began to run, were always graceful.

On his heels came portly Lucas, his stomach thrust slightly forward as usual, recalling one of those dogs that look like sausages on legs but keep to the boar's trail better than the most illustrious of hounds.

Anyone would have backed the redheaded man against him. Even Maigret, when he saw the man taking advantage of the quay's emptiness to dart forward, told his driver to speed up. There was no need to. The oddest thing was that Lucas did not seem to be hurrying. He just waddled along, looking like a respectable little middle-class Parisian out for a walk.

When the stranger heard steps close behind him, when, looking over his shoulder, he caught sight of Maigret in the taxi that had drawn level with him, he realized that it was useless to get out of breath and draw attention to himself, and he resumed a more normal pace.

Thousands of people, that afternoon, were to meet them in the streets and squares and, as in Little Albert's case, nobody suspected the drama that was taking place.

Already by the time they reached the Pont d'Austerlitz the foreigner—for Maigret thought of the man as a foreigner—was looking more anxious. He went on along the Quai Henri IV. He was getting ready for something—that was plain from his manner. And in fact, when they reached the St. Paul district, with the taxi still in pursuit, he darted forward again, but this time into the network of narrow streets that lies between Rue St. Antoine and the quays.

Maigret almost lost him because a truck was blocking one of the alleys.

Children playing on the sidewalks stared at the two men running past, and Maigret caught up with them again at last, two blocks farther on, Lucas barely out of breath, looking highly respectable in his neatly buttoned overcoat. He even had the presence of mind to give the inspector a wink as if to say:

“Don't worry!”

He did not know then that this chase, which Maigret was watching in comfort from his seat in a car, would go on for hours. Nor that it would grow more arduous as time went on.

It was after the telephone call that the man began to lose his self-confidence. He had gone into a small bar on Rue St. Antoine. Lucas had followed him in.

“Is he going to arrest him?” asked the driver, who knew Maigret.

“No.”

“Why not?”

As he saw it, a man who is being tracked down is a man who will eventually be arrested. Why, then, the needless cruelty of this chase? His reaction was that of noninitiates watching a hunt.

Without paying attention to the detective, the stranger had obtained a telephone token and shut himself up in the booth. Through the windows of the bistro Lucas could be seen taking the opportunity to refresh himself with a great glass of beer, which whetted Maigret's thirst.

The call was a long one: almost five minutes. Two or three times Lucas got up anxiously to peer through the window of the booth to make sure nothing had happened to his customer.

After that, they stood side by side at the bar, without speaking or even seeming to know one another. The man's expression had altered. He was glancing around him almost wildly, seeming to be on the lookout for the right moment, but he had probably realized that no such moment would come.

Finally he paid and left. He made off toward the Bastille, walked nearly the whole way around the Place, started down Boulevard Richard Lenoir, a stone's throw from Maigret's home, but turned right down Rue de la Roquette.

A few minutes later he had lost his way. He quite obviously did not know the district. Two or three times he seemed about to try to escape, but either there were too many people in the streets or he caught sight of a policeman's peaked cap at the next corner.

That was when he started drinking. He went into bars, not to telephone now, but to gulp down a glass of cheap brandy, and Lucas gave up following him inside.

In one of these bars somebody spoke to him, and he looked at the speaker without replying, like someone who is being addressed in an unknown language.

Maigret suddenly understood why he had immediately thought of him as a foreigner when he came into the Petit Albert. It was not so much that there was something un-French about his features or the cut of his clothes. Rather, it was the

wariness of his attitude, that of a man in strange surroundings, who cannot understand or make himself understood.

There was sunshine in the streets. The air was very mild. In the Picpus district, the concierges had pulled chairs in front of their doorways, as in some small provincial town.

Endless detours were made before they reached Boulevard Voltaire, and then the Place de la République, and here, at last, the man knew where he was.

He went down into the métro. Was he hoping to shake off Lucas? In any case, he realized that his ruse was useless, for Maigret saw both men reappear through the exit.

Rue Réamur... another detour... Rue de Turbigo... Then down Rue Chapon into Rue Beaubourg.

“He’s on familiar ground,” thought the chief inspector.

That was obvious. You could guess from the way the stranger looked around him that he recognized it all, down to the smallest shops. He was at home here. Perhaps he lived in one of the many small, shabby hotels.

He seemed to hesitate. Several times he stopped at a corner. Something held him back from doing what he wanted to do. And in this way he reached Rue de Rivoli, which formed the frontier, so to speak, of this sordid region.

He did not cross it. By way of Rue des Archives he plunged once more into the ghetto, and shortly after made his way down Rue des Rosiers.

“He doesn’t want us to find out where he lives.”

But why and whom had he telephoned? Had he appealed to his accomplices for help? What help could he hope for from them?

“I feel sorry for the poor guy,” sighed the taxi driver.
“You’re sure he’s a criminal?”

No, not even sure! And yet it was essential to hound him. It was the only chance of finding out something about Little Albert’s death.

He was sweating. His nose was running. From time to time he pulled out a big green handkerchief from his pocket. And he still went on drinking, moving away from a kind of center comprising Rue du Roi de Sicile, Rue des Ecoufres, and Rue de la Verrerie, a center around which he moved in circles without ever penetrating it.

He would move away from it and then come back, irresistibly drawn to it. Then his steps would grow slower and more uncertain. He would glance back at Lucas. And then he would look around for the taxi and watch it with a vicious glare. Who knows? Had the taxi not been on his heels, perhaps he would have tried to get rid of Lucas by leading him into some corner and murdering him.

As dusk drew nearer, the streets became livelier. There were many people lounging on the sidewalks, in front of the low, drab houses. The inhabitants of that district, as soon as spring begins, live out of doors. Windows and shop doors were wide open. There was a sickening smell of dirt and poverty, and sometimes a woman would be seen flinging out dirty water across the street.

Lucas must have come to the end of his rope, although he showed no sign of it. Maigret intended to take the first favorable opportunity to relieve him. He felt somewhat ashamed of following him in a taxi, like spectators following a hunt in their cars.

There were some crossroads they had already passed through four or five times. Then a new ruse occurred to the man. He went into the dark hall of a building, and Lucas stopped in the doorway. Maigret signaled to him to follow.

“Careful!” he shouted from his seat in the car.

A few minutes later the two men emerged again. It was obvious that the stranger had gone into the first dwelling he came to, in the hope of baffling the detectives.

He repeated this move twice more. The second time Lucas found him sitting right at the top of the staircase.

Shortly before six o'clock, they were once more at the corner of Rue du Roi de Sicile and Rue Vieille du Temple, in an almost medieval setting. The stranger hesitated once again. Then he plunged down the street, which was swarming with a poverty-stricken crowd. The grimy lamps of several hotels were glowing. The shops were narrow, mere passages leading into mysterious courtyards.

He did not go far. He had covered about ten yards when a shot rang out, sharp, and no louder than a blowout. The movement of the crowd in the street, as though by some acquired impetus, took several minutes to stop. The taxi seemed to halt of its own accord, in astonishment.

Then there was the sound of running. Lucas dashed forward. Another shot rang out.

Nothing could be seen because of the swirling crowd. Maigret did not know if the sergeant had been hit. He had got out of the car and hurried over to the stranger.

The man was sitting on the pavement. He was not dead. He was leaning on one hand and clasping his chest with the other. He turned his blue eyes on the chief inspector with a reproachful expression.

Then a veil dropped over them. A woman said:

"What a terrible thing!"

The man's shoulders swayed, and he toppled sideways across the pavement.

He was dead.

Lucas came back empty-handed but unhurt. The second shot had not hit him. The fugitive had tried to fire a third, but his gun must have misfired.

The sergeant had barely caught sight of him, and he said:

"I wouldn't be able to recognize him. I have a feeling he was dark."

The crowd, without seeming to do so, had helped the murderer to escape. As though by chance, Lucas had constantly found his way blocked.

And now they were surrounded by a ring of reproachful, almost threatening faces. People in that neighborhood were quick to recognize plain-clothes men.

A policeman in uniform soon joined them and made the inquisitive onlookers move aside.

“The city ambulance,” muttered Maigret. “Blow your whistle first to get two or three more of your men.”

He had a worried look as he gave murmured instructions to Lucas, who was to stay on the spot with the policemen. Then he looked at the dead man again. He would have liked to search his pockets right away, but a strange sense of propriety prevented him from doing this in front of the watching crowd. It would have been too precise, too professional a gesture, and would here have seemed like a profanation, indeed, a provocation.

“Be careful,” he warned in a low voice. “There’s bound to be more of them.”

He was only a few yards from the Quai des Orfèvres, where the taxi let him out. He went swiftly up to the chief’s office, knocked, and went in unannounced.

“Another corpse,” he said. “This one was shot down under our eyes like a rabbit, in the middle of the street.”

“Has he been identified?”

“Lucas will be here in a few minutes, as soon as they’ve removed the body. Can you let me have about twenty men? We’ve got to lay siege to a whole district.”

“Which district?”

“Rue du Roi de Sicile.”

And the chief of Police Headquarters in turn looked grim. Maigret went into the detectives’ office, picked out some of them, and gave them their instructions.

Then he went to find the inspector in charge of the Vice Squad.

“Can you lend me a plain-clothes man who really knows Rue du Roi de Sicile, Rue des Rosiers and the neighborhood? There must be a lot of prostitutes around there.”

“Too many.”

“In half an hour or so he’ll have a photograph.”

“Another body?”

“I’m afraid so. But his face hasn’t been damaged.”

“I get you.”

“There must be a lot of them in the neighborhood. Be careful, they’re killers.”

Then he went down into the Hotels Section and made a similar request to his colleague there.

It was important to act fast. He made sure that the detectives had left to take up their posts around the district. Then he rang up the Medicolegal Institute.

“The photos?”

“You can send for them in a few minutes. The body’s here. We’re working on it.”

He felt that he had forgotten something. He stood there, ready to go out, scratching his chin, and suddenly the image of Judge Comélieau came into his mind. Fortunately!

“Hello... Good evening, Judge... Maigret.”

“Well, Chief Inspector, and what about your café proprietor?”

“He really was a café proprietor, Judge.”

“Identified?”

“Absolutely.”

“How is the investigation going?”

“We’ve already got another corpse.”

He pictured the magistrate’s start of horror at the other end of the line.

“What did you say?”

“We’ve got another corpse. But this time he belongs to the other side.”

“You mean the police killed him?”

“No. The other gentlemen did the job.”

“What gentlemen do you mean?”

“Accomplices, probably.”

“Have they been arrested?”

“Not yet.”

He lowered his voice.

“I’m afraid it’s going to be a long, hard business, Judge. It’s a very nasty case. They’re killers, you understand.”

“I presume that if they had not been killers, there would have been no case at all.”

“You don’t understand me. They kill deliberately, to protect themselves. That’s pretty rare, you know, in spite of what the public believes. They don’t hesitate to shoot down one of their own gang.”

“Why?”

“Probably because he was no more use to them and was liable to give away their hiding place. It’s a rough district, too, one of the worst in Paris. A nest of foreigners without identification papers, or with forged ones.”

“What are you proposing to do?”

“I’ll carry out the routine, because I have to, because it’s my responsibility. There’ll be a raid tonight. It won’t result in anything.”

“I hope, in any case, that it won’t result in any fresh victims.”

“I hope so too.”

“About what time are you planning to carry it out?”

“As usual, about two in the morning.”

“I have a bridge party tonight. I shall keep it going as late as possible. Call me immediately after the raid.”

“All right, Judge.”

“When will you send me your report?”

“As soon as I have time. Probably not before tomorrow night.”

“And your bronchitis?”

“What bronchitis?”

He had forgotten about it. Lucas now came into the office, holding a red card in his hand. Maigret knew immediately what it was. It was a trade union card made out in the name of Victor Poliinsky, of Czech nationality, a worker at the Citroën factory.

“What’s the address, Lucas?”

“One Thirty-two Quai de Javel.”

“Wait a minute. I think I know that address. It’s a dirty rooming house at the corner of the quay and some street or other. We made a raid there about two years ago. Find out whether they have a phone.”

It was down there on the riverside, close to the dark mass of factory buildings, a squalid rooming house crammed with newly arrived foreigners who often slept three or four in a room in spite of police regulations. The most surprising thing was that the house was run by a woman who managed to control her crowd. She even cooked meals for them.

“Hello! Is that One Thirty-two Quai de Javel?”

A woman’s husky voice answered.

“Is Poliinsky at your place now?”

She was silent, taking her time before replying.

“I mean Victor...”

“Well?”

“Is he there?”

“Is that any of your business?”

“This is a friend.”

“You’re a cop, I know.”

“All right, then, this is the police. Does Poliensky still live there? I needn’t tell you we’ll check what you say.”

“I know what you do.”

“Well, then?”

“He hasn’t been here for six months.”

“Where did he work?”

“Citroën.”

“Has he been in France a long time?”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Could he speak French?”

“No.”

“How long did he stay with you?”

“About three months.”

“Did he have friends or visitors?”

“No.”

“Were his papers in order?”

“Probably. I haven’t heard anything about it from your Hotels Section.”

“One more question. Did he eat at your house?”

“Most of the time.”

“Did he go with women?”

“Look, you pig, do you think I bother with that sort of thing?”

He hung up and said to Lucas:

“Call the Aliens Department.”

There was no trace of the man in the files at the Prefecture of Police. In other words, the Czech had come in illegally like so many others, like the thousands that haunt the disreputable districts of Paris. No doubt he, like most of them, had got himself a forged identification card. There were shady places around the Faubourg St. Antoine where they were mass-produced for a fixed price.

“Call Citroën.”

The photographs of the dead man had arrived, and he handed them out to the detectives of the Vice Squad and the Hotels Section. He went up to the Records Office himself with the fingerprints.

There was nothing to match them among the files.

“Is Moers here?” he asked, putting his head through the door of the laboratory.

Moers ought not to have been there, for he had worked all night and all day. But he needed little sleep. He had no family, no mistress as far as anyone knew, and his only passion was his laboratory.

“I’m here, Chief.”

“Another corpse for you. Come into my office first.”

They went down there together. Lucas had spoken to the Citroën paymaster on the phone.

“The old woman was telling the truth. He worked in the factory as an unskilled laborer for three months. He hasn’t been on their payroll for nearly six months.”

“Good worker?”

“Pretty regular. But they get so many they don’t know them individually. I asked whether we could get more information by talking to the foreman, but it’s not possible. For skilled workers yes. The unskilled ones, nearly all foreigners, come and go, and nobody knows them. There are always hundreds of them waiting in front of the gate to be taken on. They work for three days, three weeks or three months, and they’re never

seen again. They're shifted from one workroom to another as they're needed."

"His pockets?"

On the desk there lay a tattered wallet, the leather of which must once have been green. It contained, besides the union card, the photograph of a girl. It was a round, fresh face under a wreath of heavy braids. A girl from the Czech countryside, no doubt.

Two thousand-franc and three hundred-franc notes.

"Quite a lot," muttered Maigret.

A long knife with a safety catch and a tapering blade, its edge as sharp as a razor's.

"Don't you think, Moers, that this knife might well have killed Little Albert?"

"It might have, Chief."

The handkerchief was green too. Victor Poliensky must have been fond of green.

"For you! Not very appetizing, but one never knows what your analyses will bring."

A pack of Caporal cigarettes and a lighter of German make. Some small coins. No key.

"You're sure, Lucas, that there was no key?"

"I'm certain, Chief."

"Has he been undressed?"

"Not yet. They're waiting for Moers."

"Off you go, old man. This time I'm too busy to go with you. You'll have to spend part of the night on the job and you'll be worn out."

"I can last for two nights running. It won't be the first time."

Maigret called up the Petit Albert.

"Anything new, Emile?"

"Nothing, Chief. We're plugging along."

“Many people?”

“Fewer than this morning. A few for apéritifs, but hardly anyone for dinner.”

“Is your wife still enjoying playing proprietress?”

“She’s delighted. She cleaned out the bedroom and changed the sheets, and we’ll be very comfortable. What about your redhead?”

“He’s dead.”

“What?”

“One of his pals knocked him off with a bullet when he was trying to get home.”

Another glance into the detectives’ room. You had to think of everything.

“The yellow Citroën?”

“Nothing new. But somebody’s said he saw it in the Barbès-Rochechouart district.”

“That’s an idea! We’ve got to follow it up.”

For reasons of geography, once again. The Barbès district is next to that of the Gare du Nord. And Albert had worked there for a long time as a waiter in a café.

“Are you hungry, Lucas?”

“Not specially. I can wait.”

“What about your wife?”

“I’ll call her up.”

“Good. I’ll call mine, too, and I’ll keep you with me.”

He was a little tired, after all, and preferred not to work alone, particularly as the night looked like it would be an exhausting one.

They stopped at the Brasserie Dauphine for a drink, and it was invariably with a naïve surprise that, when they were in the throes of an investigation, they saw life going on normally all around them, people busy with their own little concerns and

making jokes with one another. What did it mean to such people that a Czech had been shot dead on the sidewalk of Rue du Roi de Sicile? A few lines in the newspaper.

Then, one fine day, they would learn in the same way that the murderer had been arrested.

Moreover only those in the know realized that a raid was being readied for that night, in one of the most crowded and unsavory districts of Paris. Did anyone notice the detectives posted at every street corner, looking as casual as they could?

A few streetwalkers, perhaps, ensconced in corners from which they emerged from time to time to grab the arm of a passer-by, might frown on recognizing some member of the Vice Squad. These girls expected to have to go and spend part of the night at the local police station. They were used to it. It happened to them at least once a month. If they were not diseased they would be let go about ten o'clock the next morning. And then what?

Rooming-house keepers, too, resented being visited at an unusual hour to have their registers checked. Oh, they were in order! They were always in order.

A photograph would be thrust before them. They would pretend to examine it attentively, sometimes going to get their glasses.

“Do you know him?”

“Never seen him.”

“Do you have any Czechs here?”

“I have Poles, Italians, an Armenian, but no Czechs.”

“All right.”

A matter of routine. One of the detectives up at Barbès, whose sole concern was with the yellow car, questioned garage owners, mechanics, policemen, tradesmen, and concierges.

A matter of routine.

At the Quai de Charenton, Chevrier and his wife were playing at running a café, and, after closing the shutters, they would sit talking in front of the big stove before lying down peacefully in the bed that had belonged to Little Albert and cross-eyed Nine.

Another missing person who would have to be found. The Vice Squad knew nothing about her. What could have become of her? Did she know that her husband was dead? If she did, why hadn't she come forward to identify the body when the photograph had appeared in the newspapers? Others might not have recognized it, but surely she would have.

Could it be that the murderers had her? She had not been in the yellow car when the body was taken out of it and deposited in the Place de la Concorde.

"I'm willing to bet," said Maigret, who was working on a hunch, "that we'll find her someday out in the country. It's amazing how many people, when a situation gets bad, feel the need to breathe country air, in some quiet inn where the food is good and the wine light."

"Shall we take a taxi?"

It would mean more trouble with the cashier, who showed an unpleasant persistence in examining expense accounts and would often exclaim:

"Do *I* go for rides in taxis?"

They hailed one to avoid waiting for a bus on the other side of the Pont Neuf.

"The Cadran, Rue de Maubeuge."

It was a fine *brasserie* of the sort Maigret liked, not yet modernized, with the traditional mirrors around the walls, the seats upholstered in dark red cloth, the white marble tables, and, here and there, a nickel bowl for used linen. There was a pleasant smell of beer and sauerkraut. There were too many people, however, and people who were too busy, loaded with luggage, eating or drinking too fast, calling waiters impatiently, their eyes fixed on the big luminous station clock.

The proprietor, too, who stood close to the cashier's counter, with a dignified air, keeping close watch on all that was happening, was a recognizable type, short and plump, bald-headed, in a suit of ample cut and shoes of fine leather without a speck of dust.

"Two *choucroutes*, two beers, and the proprietor, please."

"You want to speak to Monsieur Jean?"

"Yes."

Was he an ex-headwaiter who had finally gone into business?

"Gentlemen?"

"I'd like some information, Monsieur Jean. You once had a waiter here called Albert Rochain, known, I believe, as Little Albert."

"I have heard of him."

"You never knew him?"

"I only took over the place three years ago. The woman who was cashier at that time used to know Albert."

"You mean she's no longer here?"

"She died last year. She had spent over forty years right here."

He pointed to the shiny wooden cashier's counter behind which was enthroned a blond young woman of about thirty.

"What about the waiters?"

"There was one old one too, Ernest, but he's retired since then; he's gone back to his own part of the world, somewhere in the Dordogne, if I'm not mistaken."

The proprietor stood there in front of the two men as they ate their *choucroute*, but he missed nothing of what was going on around him.

"Jules... Number Twenty-four..."

He smiled across the room at a departing customer.

“Françoise! Madame’s luggage...”

“Is the former proprietor still alive?”

“He’s healthier than you or me.”

“Do you know where I could find him?”

“At home, of course. He comes in to see me from time to time. He’s getting bored, and talking of going back into business.”

“Would you give me his address?”

“Police?” the proprietor asked briefly.

“Chief Inspector Maigret.”

“I beg your pardon! I don’t know the address, but I can tell you how to find him—I’ve had lunch with him there two or three times. You know Joinville? You remember the Ile d’Amour, a little beyond the bridge? He doesn’t live on the island, but in a villa just opposite the tip of it. There’s a boathouse in front. You’ll easily recognize it.”

It was half-past eight when the taxi stopped in front of the villa. A white marble plaque displayed the inscription, in block letters: “THE NEST,” with a sea bird, or what was meant to be a sea bird, perching on the edge of its nest.

“He must have worked hard to think that up!” commented Maigret as he rang the bell.

The former owner of the Cadran was in fact called Loiseau, Désiré Loiseau—the Bird.

“You’ll see that he comes from the North and that he’ll offer us a glass of old gin.”

This proved to be the case. They saw first a round little woman, very pink and white, and it took a close look to make out the fine wrinkles under her thick layer of powder.

“Monsieur Loiseau!” she called out. “Somebody for you!”

She proved, however, to be Madame Loiseau. She showed them into the drawing room, which smelled of polish.

Loiseau was plump too, but tall and broad-shouldered, broader and taller than Maigret, which did not prevent him from moving with the agility of a dancer.

“Sit down, Chief Inspector. And you too, monsieur... ?”

“Sergeant Lucas.”

“Well, now! I knew a Lucas at school. You’re not Belgian, are you, Sergeant? I am. You can tell from my accent, can’t you? Of course you can! I’m not ashamed of it, you know! It’s no disgrace! Bobonne, will you bring us something to drink?”

And they got their little glass of gin.

“Albert? Of course I remember him. A boy from the North. I believe his mother was Belgian too. I was sorry to lose him. You see, what matters most in our business is cheerfulness. People who go to cafés like to see smiling faces. I remember one waiter, for instance, very decent, who had I don’t know how many children, who used to bend over customers who ordered soda water or Vichy or anything nonalcoholic, and whisper confidentially, ‘Have you got an ulcer too?’ His whole life was wrapped up in his ulcer. He talked of nothing else, and I had to fire him because people used to move away when they saw him coming toward their table.

“Albert was just the opposite. A happy fellow. He was always humming to himself. Even the way he wore his hat looked as if he was playing tricks and making a joke of things. He had a special way of saying, ‘Lovely day today!’ ”

“He left you to start his own business?”

“Somewhere near Charenton, yes.”

“Had he been left some money?”

“I don’t think so. He never said so. I just think he got married.”

“At the time he left you?”

“Yes. A short while before.”

“Were you invited to the wedding?”

“I would certainly have been if it had taken place in Paris, because my staff were all like members of the family. But they went to the country for it, I’m not sure where.”

“You can’t remember where?”

“No. I must admit that as far as I’m concerned anything beyond the Loire is the South of France.”

“Did you ever meet his wife?”

“He brought her to see me once. A dark girl, rather plain...”

“With a squint?”

“She certainly was a little cross-eyed. But not unpleasantly so. It looks terrible in some people and not too bad in others.”

“Do you know what her maiden name was?”

“No. I seem to remember that she was some relative of his, a cousin or something. They’d always known each other. Albert used to say, ‘Since you’re bound to come to it in the end, it might as well be with somebody you know.’ He would always joke. There was nobody like him for singing funny songs, and customers have told me quite seriously that he’d have made a fortune on the music-hall stage.

“Another little glass? You see, it’s very quiet here, too quiet in fact, and I might even go back into business one of these days. Unfortunately you don’t find waiters like Albert so easily nowadays. Do you know him? Is his business doing well?”

Maigret avoided telling them that Albert was dead, since he foresaw a whole hour of lamentations and sighs.

“Did he have any close friends, to your knowledge?”

“He was friends with everybody.”

“Did anybody used to come and pick him up after work?”

“No. He liked to go to the races. He used to arrange to have his afternoons free fairly often. But he didn’t overdo it. He never tried to borrow money from me. He bet within his means. If you see him, tell him from me that...”

And Madame Loiseau, who had not opened her mouth since her husband appeared, was still smiling, like a waxwork figure in a hairdresser's window.

Another little glass? Yes, thank you. Particularly as the gin was good. Then off again, on their way to the police raid on a street where they would certainly not be met with smiles.

SIX

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Two police cars had drawn up on Rue de Rivoli, at the corner of Rue Vieille du Temple, and for a moment the street light had glinted on the silver buttons of police uniforms. Then the men had gone off to their posts, blocking a certain number of streets where plain-clothes men were already stationed.

Then, behind the police cars, came the Black Marias. Just at the corner of Rue du Roi de Sicile, a policeman stood with his eyes fixed on his watch.

People passing down Rue St. Antoine looked around uneasily and walked on faster. In the district that was being surrounded, a few lighted windows could still be seen, a little light in the doorways of rooming houses and the light over the brothel on Rue des Rosiers.

The policeman, with his eyes still fixed on his stop watch, was counting the last seconds, and beside him Maigret, looking unconcerned or only slightly ill at ease, kept his hands in his overcoat pockets and let his eyes roam.

Forty... fifty... sixty... two strident blasts of a whistle were promptly answered by other whistles. The uniformed police constables moved down the streets in extended formation, while the plain-clothes men went into the disreputable-looking hotels.

As always happens on such occasions, windows opened here and there; in the darkness white figures could be seen leaning out, displaying anxiety or annoyance. Voices were heard. A policeman passed, driving in front of him a prostitute,

found lurking in a corner, who was swearing at him in foul language.

Hurried footsteps sounded, too, as men tried to escape, plunging into the darkness of the alleys—in vain, since they only ran into some other police cordon.

“Papers!”

Pocket flashlights went on and lit up suspicious-looking faces, filthy passports and identity cards. At the windows, there were spectators who knew by experience that they would not get any more sleep for a long time and settled down to watch the raid as though it were an entertainment.

The biggest game had already been brought in to the police station. These were the people who had not waited for the raid. When they learned that a man had been killed in the neighborhood late that afternoon, they had anticipated it. And as soon as night fell, shadows had crept along the walls, men carrying old suitcases or curious bundles had walked straight into the arms of Maigret’s detectives.

There were all sorts of them: an ex-convict prohibited from entering the area, pimps, forged identity cards, as usual, Poles and Italians whose papers were not in order.

All of them, as they tried to brazen it out, were asked the same curt question:

“Where are you going?”

“I’m moving out.”

“Why?”

Anxious or angry eyes in the darkness.

“I’ve found work.”

“Where?”

Some of them spoke of going to join a sister in the North or near Toulouse.

“In you get, anyhow!”

The Black Maria. A night in the police station, while their identities were checked. These were poor wretches for the most part, but few of them had a clear conscience.

“No Czechs so far, Chief,” Maigret had been told.

Now the chief inspector stood at his post, glumly smoking his pipe, watching the shadows flit about, hearing shouts, hurried footsteps, sometimes the thud of a fist hitting a face.

The turmoil was greatest in the rooming houses. The proprietors hastily pulled on their trousers and stood sullenly in their offices, where most of them slept on cots. Some tried to offer a drink to the policemen on guard in the passages, while plain-clothes men plodded heavily upstairs.

After that the house would be full of swarming life in all its fetid cells. There would be a knock on the first door.

“Police!”

People in their shirts, men and women, half awake, their faces wan, all with the same anxious and sometimes haggard look.

“Your papers!”

Barefooted, they went to hunt for these under their pillows or in a drawer, sometimes having to search in ancient, old-fashioned trunks that had come from the other side of Europe.

At the Hotel du Lion d’Or, a man was sitting stark naked on his bed with his legs dangling, while his companion produced her prostitute’s card.

“What about yours?”

He stared uncomprehendingly at the detective.

“Your passport?”

He still did not move. The pallor of his body was heightened by the long black hairs that covered it. On the landing some neighbors were watching him and laughing.

“Who is he?” the detective asked the woman.

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t he tell you anything?”

“He doesn’t speak a word of French.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“In the street.”

Off to the police station! His clothes were thrust into his hand. He was told, by signs, to get dressed, and for a long time he did not understand, but protested, turning to his companion, from whom he seemed to be demanding something. His money probably. Perhaps he had only just landed in France that evening, and he would end his first night in a police station at the Quai de l’Horloge.

“Papers...”

Half-open doors gave glimpses of dilapidated rooms, each of which, besides the smell of the house, emitted the smell of the guests who had spent a week or a night there.

Fifteen or twenty people were massed in front of the police vans. One by one they were pushed inside, and some of the streetwalkers, who were used to it, joked with the policemen. Some of them, for fun, made obscene gestures at them.

There were people in tears, and men clenching their fists; one of these was a fair boy with shaven head, who had no papers of any kind and had been found carrying a gun.

Only a preliminary screening, however, was taking place in the hotels and in the streets. The real work would be done at the police station, either during that night or next morning.

“Papers...”

Rooming-house keepers were the most nervous because their licenses were at stake. Not one of them proved to be in order. Unregistered guests were found in every house.

“You know, Officer, I’ve always kept the rules, but when a visitor turns up at midnight and you’re half asleep...”

A window was flung open at the Hotel du Lion d’Or, whose milky globe glowed nearest to Maigret. The blast of a whistle rang out. The chief inspector stepped forward and looked up.

“What’s happening?”

A very young detective was up there, saying timidly:

“I think you ought to come up.”

Maigret made his way up the narrow stairs, with Lucas at his heels. The steps creaked. All these houses ought to have been pulled down years, not to say centuries, ago, or rather burned, with their nests of lice and fleas brought from every country of the world.

It was on the second floor. A door stood open, and an unshaded yellow light was glowing at the end of a cord. The room was empty. It held two iron beds, one of which was unmade. There were also a mattress on the floor, blankets of shoddy gray wool, a jacket over a chair, an alcohol burner, some food and empty wine bottles on a table.

“This way, Chief...”

The door leading into the next room was open, and Maigret saw a woman lying in bed, a face against the pillow, two magnificent, glowing dark eyes staring wildly at him.

“What’s this?” he asked.

He had seldom seen so expressive a face. He had never seen one more wholly wild.

“Just look at her,” stammered the sergeant. “I tried to make her get up. I spoke to her, but she didn’t try to answer. Then I went up to the bed. I tried to shake her by the shoulders. Look at my hand. She bit me, and she drew blood.”

The woman did not smile when she saw the detective showing his wounded thumb. On the contrary, her features contracted as though with violent pain.

And Maigret, who was watching the bed closely, muttered with a frown:

“She’s in labor!”

He turned to Lucas.

“Call an ambulance. Take her to the maternity hospital. Tell the proprietor to come up here right away.”

The young sergeant was blushing scarlet now and dared not look at the bed. The hunt still went on through the remaining floors of the house, and the floor boards shook.

“Aren’t you going to speak?” Maigret asked the woman. “Don’t you understand French?”

She went on staring at him, and it was impossible to guess what she was thinking. The only feeling her face expressed was a fierce, wild hostility.

She was quite young, probably under twenty-five, and her round cheeks were framed with long, silky black hair. Someone stumbled up the stairs. The rooming-house keeper paused, hesitantly, in the doorway.

“Who is she?”

“They call her Maria.”

“Maria what?”

“I don’t think she’s got any other name.”

Suddenly Maigret was seized with a fury that he promptly felt ashamed of. He picked up a man’s shoe from the foot of the bed.

“And this... ?” he shouted, flinging it at the proprietor’s legs. “Has this got no name either... ? And this... ? And this... ?”

He grabbed a jacket, a dirty shirt from the bottom of the wardrobe, another shoe, a cap.

“And this?”

He went into the next room and pointed to two suitcases standing in a corner.

“And this?”

Some cheese on a piece of greasy paper, four glasses, and plates containing the remains of some cold meat.

“Were they down in your book, all the people who lived here? Eh? Answer me! And first of all, how many of them were there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does this woman speak French?”

“I don’t know... No! She understands a few words...”

“How long has she been here?”

“I don’t know.”

He had an ugly blue boil on his neck, an unhealthy look, and sparse hair. He had not pulled up his suspenders, and his trousers were slipping down over his hips; he was clutching them with both hands.

“When did this begin?”

Maigret was pointing to the woman.

“Nobody told me...”

“You’re lying! And the others? Where are they?”

“They must have gone...”

“When?”

Maigret bore down on him relentlessly. He could have willingly hit him then.

“They got out as soon as that man was shot in the street, admit it! They were sharper than the rest. They didn’t wait till the police closed the streets.”

The proprietor made no reply.

“Look at this, admit you know him!”

He thrust at him the photograph of Victor Poliensky.

“Do you know him?”

“Yes.”

“Did he live in this room?”

“In the one next door.”

“With the others? And who slept with this woman?”

“I swear I don’t know anything about it. A lot of them, maybe...”

Lucas came up the stairs again. Almost at the same time the ambulance siren sounded outside. The woman uttered a cry, wrung from her by pain, but immediately bit her lips and looked defiantly at the men.

“Listen, Lucas. I’ll have to stay here a while longer. You go with her. Don’t leave her. I mean, stay in the corridor at the hospital. I’ll try to get hold of a Czech interpreter.”

Other roomers who were being taken in made their way heavily down the stairs, colliding with the ambulance men, who were bringing up the stretcher. In the dim light everything wore a ghostly look. It was like a nightmare, but a nightmare that smelled of grime and sweat.

Maigret went into the next room while the ambulance men took care of the young woman.

“Where are you taking her?” he asked Lucas.

“To Laënnec. I called up three hospitals before I could get a bed.”

The rooming-house keeper, not daring to move, stared gloomily at the floor.

“Stay here. Shut the door!” Maigret ordered when the coast was clear. “Now, talk.”

“I don’t know anything, I swear.”

“Tonight a sergeant came and showed you the photo. Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“You said you didn’t know the man.”

“Excuse me! I said he wasn’t a roomer here.”

“What d’you mean?”

“He’s not registered here, or the woman. Both the rooms are in another fellow’s name.”

“Since when?”

“About five months ago.”

“What’s his name?”

“Serge Madok.”

“Is he the leader?”

“The leader of what?”

“I’m going to give you a piece of advice: don’t act stupid! Or we’ll have to talk somewhere else, and tomorrow morning your place will be closed down. Do you get me?”

“I’ve always been law-abiding.”

“Except tonight. Tell me about this Serge Madok. A Czech?”

“That’s what’s written on his papers. They all speak the same language. It’s not Polish—I’m used to Poles.”

“How old?”

“About thirty. At first he told me he was working in a factory.”

“Did he really work there?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he used to stay here all day.”

“And the others?”

“The others too. There was never more than one of them out at a time. Usually it was the woman, who did the shopping on Rue St. Antoine.”

“What did they do from morning till night?”

“Nothing. They used to sleep and eat and drink, and they played cards. They were quiet. Sometimes they would start singing, but never at night, so I couldn’t complain.”

“How many of them were there?”

“Four men, and Maria.”

“And what went on between those four men and Maria?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying! Tell me.”

“Something went on, but I’m not sure what. Sometimes they’d fight, and I gathered it was about her. Several times I went into the back room, and it wasn’t always the same man who came out of it.”

“What about the one in the photo, Victor Poliinsky?”

“I think so. He must have, sometimes. Anyway he was in love with her.”

“Which of them was the most important?”

“I think it was the one they called Carl. I’ve heard his other name, but it’s so complicated I’ve never been able to pronounce it and I can’t remember it.”

“Just a minute.”

Maigret pulled his little notebook from his pocket and wet his pencil like a schoolboy.

“First the woman you call Maria. Then Carl. Then Serge Madok, in whose name the rooms were booked. Victor Poliinsky, the one who’s dead. Is that all?”

“There’s the kid.”

“What kid?”

“I suppose he’s Maria’s brother. Anyway he looks like her. I’ve always heard him called Pietr. He must be sixteen or seventeen.”

“Doesn’t he work either?”

The landlord shook his head. He felt cold, without his jacket, since Maigret had opened the window to air the rooms—although the air from the streets was almost as foul as that of the hotel—and he was beginning to shiver.

“None of them work.”

“But they spent a lot of money.”

Maigret pointed to a pile of empty bottles in a corner, among which there were champagne bottles.

“For this district, they did spend a lot. It varied from time to time. Sometimes they had to do without. You could easily tell.

When the kid made several trips with empty bottles to sell them back to the shops, that meant there was no money.”

“Did anybody come to see them?”

“It might have happened.”

“Do you want to go on with this conversation at Police Headquarters?”

“No. I’ll tell you everything I know. Somebody came to see them two or three times.”

“Who?”

“A gentleman, well dressed.”

“Did he come up to the room? What did he say when he went by your office?”

“He didn’t ask anything. He must have known what floor they lived on. He used to go right up.”

“Is that everything?”

Outside the excitement had gradually died down. Lights had gone out in the windows. A few policemen could still be heard making a last round, knocking at doors.

The police officer came upstairs.

“I’m ready for orders, Chief Inspector. We’ve finished. The two vans are full.”

“They can go. Will you tell a couple of my sergeants to come up?”

The rooming-house keeper whimpered, “I’m cold.”

“And I’m too hot.”

Only he could not bear to lay down his overcoat anywhere in that filthy house.

“Have you ever met the man who came to see them anywhere else? Have you ever seen his picture in the papers? Was it this man?”

He showed the photographs of Little Albert, which he always carried in his pocket.

“That’s not like him. He was a good-looking man, very smart, with a little dark mustache.”

“How old?”

“About thirty-five, maybe? I noticed he had a big gold signet ring.”

“A Frenchman or a Czech?”

“Not a Frenchman. He spoke to them in their own language.”

“Did you listen at the door?”

“Sometimes. I like to know what’s going on in my own house, you understand?”

“Particularly as you must have understood pretty soon yourself.”

“Understood what?”

“Do you think I’m a fool? What do they do, men who hide in a dump like this and don’t try to find a job? What do they live on? Tell me that!”

“That’s none of my business.”

“How many times have they all gone out together?”

The man reddened, hesitated, but Maigret’s gaze caused him to speak with a certain honesty.

“Four or five times.”

“For how long? A whole night?”

“How do you know it was at night? Usually for a whole night. But once they stayed away two days and two nights, and I even thought they weren’t coming back.”

“You thought they’d been caught, didn’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“What did they give you when they came back?”

“They paid their rent.”

“One person’s rent? There was only one person registered.”

“They gave me a little more.”

“How much? You better be careful, my friend. Don’t forget that I can run you in for aiding and abetting.”

“One time they gave me five hundred francs. Another time two thousand.”

“And then they’d have a spending spree?”

“Yes. They’d go out and get lots of food.”

“Who kept watch?”

This time the landlord’s uneasiness seemed more marked, and he instinctively glanced toward the door.

“There are two ways out of your place, aren’t there?”

“Yes, if you go through the back yards and climb over two walls, you come out on Rue Vieille du Temple.”

“Who kept watch?”

“In the street?”

“Yes, in the street. And I suppose there was always one at the window? When Madok rented the rooms he must have asked for one overlooking the street?”

“That’s right. And there was always one of them hanging around on the sidewalk. They took it in turns.”

“One more piece of information: which of them threatened to kill you if you talked?”

“Carl.”

“When?”

“The first time they came back after they were away all night.”

“How did you know they meant it, that they were killers?”

“I went into the bedroom. I often make the rounds on the pretext of seeing if the electricity’s working all right, or if the sheets have been changed.”

“Are they changed often?”

“Once a month. I caught the woman washing a shirt in the basin, and I saw right away there was blood on it.”

“Whose shirt?”

“One of the men’s, I don’t know whose.”

Two plain-clothes men were waiting patiently on the landing for Maigret’s orders.

“One of you go and call Moers. He must be asleep at this time of night, unless he’s finishing his job. If he’s not at Headquarters, call him at home. Tell him to come here with his equipment.”

Now, ignoring the landlord, he went back and forth between the two rooms, opening a cupboard here and a drawer there, poking a heap of dirty clothes with his foot. On the walls the faded paper was peeling off in places. The iron bedsteads were black and grimy, the blankets of an ugly barracks-room gray. Everything was in confusion. At the time of their flight, they must have hurriedly picked up their most valuable belongings, but they had not dared carry away anything cumbersome for fear of attracting attention.

“Did they leave right after the shots?” inquired Maigret.

“Right away.”

“Through the front?”

“Through the yards.”

“Who was out then?”

“Victor, of course. And Serge Madok.”

“Which one went down to the phone?”

“How d’you know anyone phoned?”

“Answer me!”

“Somebody called them about half-past four, that’s right. I didn’t recognize the voice, but it was someone who spoke their language and just said Carl’s name. I called Carl. He came down. I can still see him in my office, acting like he was wild. He was yelling into the phone, very loud. When he went

upstairs he began swearing and banging around, and Madok came down after that.”

“Then it was Madok who shot his pal.”

“Probably.”

“Didn’t they try and take the woman with them?”

“I talked to them about it when they came down the hall. I knew it was going to mean trouble. I’d have been glad to get rid of all of them. I didn’t know she was so near her time. I went up and told her to get out like the rest. She was lying there, staring at me. You know, she understands more French than she lets on. She didn’t bother to answer, but at one point her pains came and I caught on.”

“You, young fellow,” Maigret said to the detective, who was still there, “wait till Moers comes. Don’t let anyone into these two rooms, particularly this rat. Are you armed?”

The detective showed the gun bulging in his jacket pocket.

“Moers is to do fingerprints first. Then he’s to take away anything that might give us a lead. They haven’t left any papers behind, of course. I made sure of that.”

Old socks, trousers, a harmonica, a box with needles and thread, some clothes, several packs of playing cards, some little figures hand carved out of soft wood...

He went downstairs close on the heels of the landlord, whom he drove in front of him. What was known as the office was a tiny room, badly lit and with no ventilation at all, where there were a cot and a table with a portable stove and the remains of a meal.

“I suppose you didn’t notice the dates when they stayed away.”

Very quickly the man replied in the negative.

“I thought so. It doesn’t matter. You can have till tomorrow morning to remember. Do you hear? Tomorrow morning I’ll come here, or I’ll send for you to come and see me at my office. And then I’ll want the dates, *the exact dates*, mark my words. Otherwise I’ll have to lock you up.”

The landlord still had something to say, but he seemed to hesitate.

“If by any chance they should come... would you... would you authorize me to use my gun?”

“You realize that you know too much, don’t you, and you’re afraid they might take care of you as they did Victor?”

“I’m scared.”

“We’ll leave a policeman in the street.”

“They might come through the courtyards...”

“I thought of that. I’ll station another on Rue Vieille du Temple, too.”

The streets were deserted, and the silence came as a surprise after the excitement of the last few hours. There was no longer any trace of the raid. The lights were out in all the windows. Everyone was asleep, except those who had been taken to the station, and except Maria, who must now be giving birth to her child in the hospital, while Lucas paced up and down outside the door.

Maigret posted two men as he had promised, gave them detailed instructions, and waited for some time on Rue de Rivoli before he found a taxi. The night was clear and cool.

He hesitated as he got into the car. After all, he had slept the night before. He had rested for three days and three nights during the time of his so-called bronchitis. And did Moers find time to sleep?

“Where’ll I find a place that’s still open?” he asked.

He felt hungry all of a sudden. Hungry and thirsty. The thought of a glass of cool beer topped with silvery foam made his mouth water.

“Except for the night clubs I can only think of La Coupole or the little bistros around Les Halles.”

He knew that. Why had he asked?

“To La Coupole.”

The main dining room was closed, but the bar was still open, with a few drowsy customers. He ordered a couple of huge ham sandwiches and drank three half pints in quick succession. He had kept his taxi waiting. It was four in the morning.

“Quai des Orfèvres.”

On the way there he changed his mind.

“Go to the police station on the Quai de l’Horloge.”

All his crowd was there, and the smell was reminiscent of Rue du Roi de Sicile. The men had been parked on one side, the women on the other, with all the tramps, drunks, and tarts picked up overnight in Paris.

Some were asleep on the floor. Those who were used to the place had taken off their shoes and were rubbing their aching feet. Some of the women were joking with the guards through the bars, and occasionally one of them would pull up her skirts defiantly.

The policemen were playing cards beside a stove on which coffee was being heated. There were some plain-clothes men awaiting Maigret’s orders.

In theory, it wouldn’t be until eight o’clock that they would have their papers looked over, would be sent upstairs and stripped naked for medical examination.

“You can start, boys. The inspector on day duty can check the papers. I want you to take the people from Rue du Roi de Sicile one by one, especially the women. Most of all the ones of either sex who live in the Hotel du Lion d’Or, if there are any...”

“One woman and two men.”

“Good. Make them tell whatever they know about the Czechs and Maria.”

He gave them a brief description of the members of the gang, and each of them installed himself at a table. Then they began the interrogation, which was to last the rest of the night, while Maigret made his way through the Palais de Justice,

along dark passages where he had to grope for the light switches, and reached his own office.

Joseph, the messenger on night duty, greeted him, and it was good to see his kindly face again. There was a light on in the sergeants' room, and he heard the telephone ringing.

Maigret went in. Bodin was on the telephone, saying:

"I'll tell him... he's just come in..."

It was Lucas, to say that Maria had just given birth to a nine-pound boy. She had tried to leap out of her bed while the nurse was leaving the room with the baby to wash it

SEVEN

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When he got out of his taxi on Rue de Sèvres, opposite the Laënnec Hospital, Maigret saw a big car bearing the registration mark of the Diplomatic Corps. In the doorway a tall, thin man was waiting, dressed with depressing correctness, his gestures so impeccably studied, his facial expressions so perfect, that one was tempted not to listen to the syllables he slowly enunciated, but to gaze at him as a remarkable spectacle.

And yet he was not even a minor secretary at the Czechoslovak Embassy, but a mere clerk from the legation.

“His Excellency tells me...” he began.

And Maigret, for whom the hours that had just elapsed had been among the busiest in his whole life, merely mumbled as he led the way in:

“All right!”

However, halfway up the hospital staircase he turned around to ask a question that startled his companion.

“You speak Czech, I hope?”

Lucas was in the corridor, with his elbows propped against a window sill, gazing gloomily into the garden. It was a gray, rainy morning. A nurse had come to ask him not to smoke, and he pointed to Maigret’s pipe with a sigh. “They’ll make you put it out, Chief.”

They had to wait until the nurse on duty came to get them. She was a middle-aged woman who appeared unimpressed by Maigret’s fame and who must have had no love for the police.

“You’re not to tire her. When I give you a sign to leave, please be good enough to do so without a fuss.”

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and led the way into the little white room where Maria seemed to be dozing, while her baby slept in a cradle by the side of her bed. And yet she was

peering between the lashes of her half-closed eyes, watching the actions of the two men.

She was just as beautiful as she had been by night, on Rue du Roi de Sicile. Her face was paler. Her hair had been arranged in two thick braids around her head.

Maigret laid his hat down on a chair and said to the Czech:

“Will you ask her her name?”

He waited, without much hope. As he expected, the young woman merely glared with a look of hatred at the man who was speaking to her in her own language.

“She won’t answer,” said the interpreter. “As far as I can judge, she’s not a Czech but a Slovak. I spoke to her in both languages, but it was when I used the second that she reacted.”

“Please explain to her that I strongly advise her to answer my questions, otherwise, in spite of her condition, she might be transferred this very day to the prison hospital.”

The Czech assumed an attitude of offended dignity, and the nurse, who was prowling around the room, muttered under her breath:

“The very idea!”

Then she turned to Maigret.

“Didn’t you read the notice at the foot of the stairs that smoking is forbidden?”

With unexpected meekness, the chief inspector took his pipe out of his mouth and allowed it to go out between his fingers.

Maria had at last uttered a few words.

“Will you translate that?”

“She says she doesn’t care, and that she hates us all. I wasn’t mistaken. She is a Slovak, probably a southern Slovak, a country girl.”

He seemed relieved at that. His personal honor, as a pure Czech from Prague, was no longer involved, since the woman was merely a Slovak peasant.

Maigret had pulled his black notebook from his pocket.

“Ask her where she was on the night of October twelfth last year.”

This time her gaze grew more somber and rested steadily on Maigret. No sound issued from her lips, however.

“And again on the night of December eighth.”

She moved. Her breast heaved. She had instinctively turned toward the cradle as if to pick up her child and protect it.

She was a splendid female animal. The nurse alone failed to recognize that she was different from the rest of them, and went on treating her like an ordinary woman, like just another maternity case.

“Haven’t you finished asking her these stupid questions?”

“I’m going to ask her another, which may make you change your opinion, madame or mademoiselle.”

“Mademoiselle, please.”

“I thought as much. Please translate, monsieur. During the night of December eighth to ninth, on a farm at St. Gilles les Vaudreuves in Picardy, an entire family was brutally hacked to death with an ax. On the night of October twelfth, an old farmer and his wife were killed in the same way on their farm at St. Aubin, also in Picardy. And on November twenty-first, an old couple and their servant, who was a poor half-wit, had also been attacked with the same weapon.”

“I suppose you’re going to say she did it.”

“One moment, mademoiselle. Let that be translated, please.”

The Czech translated with an air of disgust, as if he felt contaminated by talking about these massacres. At the very first words, the woman tried to sit up in bed, uncovering one of her breasts, which she made no attempt to cover.

“Until December eighth nothing was known about the murderers, because they left no survivors behind them. You follow me, mademoiselle?”

“I believe the doctor only gave permission for a few minutes’ visit.”

“Don’t worry. She’s strong. Just look at her.”

She still looked beautiful, with her baby beside her, like a she-wolf or a lioness, as she must have been beautiful at the head of her male followers.

“Translate word for word, please. On December eighth there was one oversight. A nine-year-old girl, barefoot and in her nightgown, managed to slip out of her bed before anyone noticed her. She hid in a corner, where nobody thought of looking for her. The child saw things, and heard things. She saw a dark-haired young woman, a splendid, wild-looking creature, burning her mother’s feet with a candle flame while one of the men split the old grandfather’s head open and another poured out drinks for his friends. The farmer’s wife screamed and prayed and writhed in agony while this woman...”

He pointed to the young mother’s bed.

“... while this woman, with a smile, inflicted an even more excruciating torture, burning her breasts with a cigarette.”

“Please!” protested the nurse.

“Translate that.”

Meanwhile he watched Maria, who lay there withdrawn into herself, never taking her glittering eyes off him.

“Ask her if she’s got anything to say.”

But they got nothing but a contemptuous smile.

“The little girl who escaped the slaughter, who is now an orphan and has been adopted by a family in Amiens, was confronted this morning with a photograph of this woman, sent by telephoto. She definitely recognized it. She hadn’t been given any warning, she was merely shown the picture, and her reaction was so violent that she had hysterics. Translate, my Czech friend.”

“She’s a Slovak,” the Czech repeated.

And at that point the baby began to cry; the nurse, after consulting her watch, took it out of its cradle, and the mother followed it with her gaze while it was being changed.

“I’d like to point out that your time’s up, Inspector.”

“What about the people I’ve been telling you about— was their time up too?”

“She’s got to feed her baby.”

“Let her feed it.”

And it was certainly the first time that Maigret had carried on such an interrogation, while a newborn child puts its lips to the white breast of a murderess.

“She’s still not saying anything I suppose she won’t say anything, either, when you tell her about the widow, Madame Rival, who was murdered like the others on her farm on January nineteenth. She was the most recent victim. Her daughter, a woman of forty, was killed too. I presume Maria was present. As usual, marks of burning were found on the body. Translate that.”

He felt an atmosphere of profound uneasiness around him, a veiled hostility, but he did not care. He was exhausted. If he had sat down in an armchair for five minutes he would have fallen asleep.

“Now talk to her about her companions, her men, Victor Poliensky, a sort of village idiot with the strength of a gorilla, Serge Madok with his thick neck and greasy skin, Carl, and the boy they call Pietr.”

She listened to the names as Maigret spoke them and, at each of them, she gave a start.

“Was the boy her lover too?”

“Do I have to translate that?”

“Please. You won’t make her blush.”

She was at bay, yet the mention of the young boy brought a faint smile to her lips.

“Ask her if he was really her brother.”

Strangely enough, there were moments when a tender warmth glowed in the woman's eyes, and not only when she held the child's face against her breast.

"Now, my Czech friend..."

"My name is Franz Lehel."

"I couldn't care less. Please translate, very accurately, word for word, what I'm going to say. It's possible that your compatriot's life may depend on it. Tell her that first of all, her life depends on the attitude she takes."

"Must I really?"

While the nurse muttered:

"It's revolting!"

Maria, however, did not flinch. She only turned a little paler, and then managed to smile.

"There's one other person we don't know, who their leader is."

"Shall I translate that?"

"Please."

This time they drew an ironical smile from the young mother.

"She won't speak, I know. I expected as much when I came. She's not the kind of woman you can scare. But, there's one detail I must know, because human lives are at stake."

"Shall I translate?"

"Why did I send for you?"

"To translate. I beg your pardon."

Standing very stiffly, he seemed to be reciting a lesson.

"Between October twelfth and November twenty-first, there was about a month and a half. Between November twenty-first and December eighth, a little over two weeks. Then another six weeks to January nineteenth. You don't understand? It's roughly the time it took the gang to spend their money. Now we're at the end of February. I can't promise anything. Others

will decide her fate, when the case comes up at the Assizes. Translate that.”

“Would you repeat the dates?”

He recited his piece again, and then waited.

“Now tell her that if, by answering my last questions, she prevents further bloodshed, it will be taken into account.”

She did not flinch, but her lip curled contemptuously.

“I’m not asking her where her friends are at this moment. I’m not even asking her the leader’s name. I want to know if their money is low, if a new murder is planned for the near future.”

The only result was to make Maria’s eyes gleam more brightly.

“All right. She won’t answer. I think I’ve understood. We still have to find out whether Victor Toliensky was the killer.”

She listened closely to the translation and then waited, while Maigret fretted at having to work through the medium of this clerk from the legation.

“Presumably the hatchet was just one man’s job, and if it was not Victor’s, I don’t see why the gang bothered to carry a half-wit around with them. It was he, after all, who got Maria caught and who’ll get them all caught eventually.”

Once again, a translation. Now, she seemed triumphant. They knew nothing. She was the only one who knew. She was lying in her bed, weak, with a newborn child clinging to her breast, but she had held her tongue and she would go on holding it.

An involuntary glance at the window betrayed the thought at the back of her mind. When they had left her on Rue du Roi de Sicile—and it was most likely she herself who had insisted on being left—they must have made her a promise.

She knew her men. She trusted them. As long as they were at liberty she was safe. They would come. Sooner or later they would rescue her from this place, or even from the prison hospital.

She was magnificent. Her nostrils were quivering. Her full lips were curled in an untranslatable expression. She was not the same as those around her, nor were her men. They had chosen once and for all to live as outlaws. They were like powerful wild beasts, and the bleating of sheep produced no compassion in their hearts.

Where, in what lower depths, in what atmosphere of destitution had their association been formed? They had all known hunger. That was borne out by the fact that when they had finished a job their only concern was to eat, to eat and drink all day long, to sleep, make love, and then eat again, oblivious of the sordid surroundings of Rue du Roi de Sicile and their worn and ragged clothes.

They did not kill for money. Money for them was merely a means of enabling them to eat and sleep in peace, in their lair, indifferent to the rest of mankind.

She was devoid of personal vanity. The dresses found in the room had been cheap such as she had worn in her own village. She used no powder or lipstick. She had no fine underwear. The whole gang might, in other ages or in other latitudes, have lived in the same way, naked, in the forest or in the jungle.

“Tell her that I’ll come back, that I’m asking her to think it over. She has a child now.”

He dropped his voice involuntarily to utter these last words.

“We’ll leave you now,” he said to the nurse. “I’ll send another plain-clothes man in a while. I’ll call Dr. Boucard. She’s his patient, isn’t she?”

“He’s the head of the department.”

“If she’s able to be moved, she’ll probably be transferred tonight or tomorrow morning to La Santé.”

In spite of what he had disclosed about her patient, the nurse still glared at him resentfully.

“Good-by, mademoiselle. Come along, monsieur.”

In the corridor he said a few words to Lucas, who was unaware of what had been going on. The nurse who had

brought them up from the first floor was waiting for them a little farther on. In front of a door there stood five or six vases full of fresh flowers.

“Whose are these?” he asked.

The nurse was young and blond, with plump curves under her uniform.

“They’re nobody’s now. The lady who was in this room went home a few minutes ago. She left her flowers behind. She had a lot of friends.”

He spoke to her in a low voice. She said yes. She seemed surprised. But the Czech would have been even more surprised if he had guessed what Maigret had just done.

He had simply said, with a touch of embarrassment:

“Would you take some of them to Number Two Seventeen?”

Because the room was bare and cold, because, after all, there was a woman in there with a newborn child.

It was half-past eleven. In the long, dimly lit corridor where the doors of the examining magistrates’ rooms stand in a row, a few men were still waiting, handcuffed, tieless, surrounded by policemen, sitting on backless benches. There were women, too, and witnesses growing impatient.

Judge Comélieu, looking worried and more solemn than ever, had had chairs brought in from one of his colleagues’ rooms, and had sent his clerk off to lunch.

At Maigret’s request, the chief of Police Headquarters was present, seated in an armchair, while the chair generally reserved for those who are being questioned was occupied by Inspector Colombani, of the Sûreté Nationale.

Since Police Headquarters, in theory, is concerned only with Paris and the neighborhood, it was he who, for the past five months, in conjunction with the Flying Squad, had been conducting the investigation of the Picardy Killers, as the newsmen had christened the gang after their first crime.

Early that morning he had had an interview with Maigret and had shown him his files.

Early, too, a little before nine o'clock, one of the plain-clothes men stationed on Rue du Roi de Sicile had knocked at the chief inspector's door.

"He's here," he had announced.

The person in question was the landlord of the Hotel du Lion d'Or. That night, or what was left of it, had taught him wisdom. Wan, unshaved, his clothes rumpled, he had accosted the detective who was pacing up and down before the house.

"I'd like to go to the Quai des Orfèvres," he had announced.

"Go on over, then."

"I'm scared."

"I'll go with you."

But hadn't Victor been shot down in the street, in the midst of the crowd?

"I'd rather take a taxi. I'll pay for it."

When he entered Maigret's room, the chief inspector had his record in front of him, for the man had three previous convictions.

"Have you got those dates?"

"I've been thinking about them, yes. We'll just have to see what happens. As long as you promise to protect me..."

He reeked of cowardice and disease. His whole being suggested a festering sore. And yet it was this man who had been arrested twice for indecent assault.

"The first time they stayed away, I didn't pay much attention, but the second time I noticed it."

"The second? You mean on November twenty-first?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've thought it over too, and because I've read the papers."

“I thought it might be them, but I didn’t let on.”

“They guessed all the same, eh?”

“I don’t know. They gave me a thousand francs.”

“Yesterday you said five hundred.”

“I made a mistake. It was the time after, when they got back, that Carl threatened me.”

“Did they leave in a car?”

“I don’t know. Anyway they left the house on foot.”

“The other man’s visits, the man you don’t know, used to take place a few days before?”

“Now I come to think of it, they probably did.”

“Did he sleep with Maria too?”

“No.”

“Now be kind enough to make a clean breast of it. Remember your two first convictions.”

“I was young then.”

“All the more disgusting. Now, being the sort of fellow you are, you must have had your eye on Maria too.”

“I never touched her.”

“Of course! You were afraid of the others.”

“And her, too.”

“Good! This time you’re being honest. But don’t tell me you never did more than just open the door once in a while!”

“I did make a hole in the wall, it’s true. I had the next-door room occupied as little as I could.”

“Who slept with her?”

“All of them.”

“Including the boy?”

“Specially the boy.”

“Yesterday you told me he was probably her brother.”

“Because he looks like her. He was the most in love. I’ve seen him crying a lot of times. When he was with her he used to beg her to...”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t speak French. When another one of them was in the bedroom, the boy would go down and get drunk all by himself in a little bistro on Rue des Rosiers.”

“Did they fight?”

“There was no love lost between the men.”

“Don’t you really know whose was the bloodstained shirt you saw being washed in the basin?”

“I’m not sure. I saw Victor wearing it, but they used to swap clothes.”

“In your opinion, which of the gang that lived in your place was the leader?”

“There was no leader. When they had a fight, Maria used to raise hell with them, and then they’d shut up.”

The rooming-house keeper had gone back to his slum, accompanied by a plain-clothes man to whom he clung nervously in the street, sweating with fear.

And now Judge Comélieu, in his stiff collar and dark tie and his impeccable suit, was watching Maigret, who sat on the window sill with his back to the courtyard.

“The woman has said nothing and she won’t talk,” the chief inspector said, puffing at his pipe. “Since last night we’ve got three wild beasts loose in Paris, Serge Madok, Carl, and little Pietr, who’s no innocent choirboy for all his tender years. Not to mention the one who used to visit them and who’s probably the leader of the whole gang.”

“I assume,” interrupted the judge, “that you have taken all the necessary steps?”

He would gladly have caught Maigret in a mistake. The latter had learned too much in too short a time, without seeming to be aware of it. While apparently concerned only

with his dead man, Little Albert, he had unearthed a gang that the police had been hunting in vain for the past five months.

“The railway stations have been alerted, don’t worry. It’ll do no good, but it’s a matter of routine. Main roads and frontiers are being watched. Routine again. Lots of circulars, telegrams, telephone calls, thousands of people on the lookout, but...”

“It’s indispensable.”

“Rooming houses are being watched too, particularly those like the Hotel du Lion d’Or. These men have got to sleep somewhere...”

“A newspaper editor who’s a friend of mine called me a while ago to make a complaint about you. Apparently you refused to give the least bit of information to reporters.”

“That’s correct. I think there’s no point in alarming the inhabitants of Paris by letting them know that there are killers at large in the streets of the city.”

“I agree with Maigret,” the chief of Police Headquarters asserted.

“I’m not criticizing you, gentlemen. I am trying to form an opinion. You have your own methods. Chief Inspector Maigret, in particular, has his own, which are sometimes rather peculiar. He does not always seem very eager to keep me informed, yet after all the final responsibility is mine alone. The Public Prosecutor, at my request, has linked the case of the Picardy Killers with that of Little Albert. I should like to get things clear.”

“We already know,” Maigret recited in a deliberately monotonous voice, “how the victims were selected.”

“Have you had some evidence from the North?”

“We didn’t need it. Moers picked up a number of fingerprints in the two rooms on Rue du Roi de Sicile. Though these gentlemen, when they were operating on the farms, wore rubber gloves and left no trace behind them, and though Little Albert’s murderers also wore gloves, the roomers at the Lion d’Or were at home, and went around with bare hands. Records recognized the prints of only one of them.”

“Which one?”

“Carl. His name is Carl Lipschitz. He was born in Bohemia and came into France legally, five years ago, with a passport in good order. He was one of a group of agricultural workers who were sent to big farms in Picardy and Artois.”

“In what connection is he on the record?”

“Two years ago, he was accused of raping and murdering a little girl in St. Aubin. He was then working at a farm in that village. He was arrested on the strength of widespread rumors, but was released a month later for lack of proof. After that we lost track of him. He probably came to Paris. We’ll check factories around the city, and it wouldn’t surprise me to find that he had worked at Citroën too. We’ve already sent a man out there.”

“So we’ve identified one of them.”

“It’s not very much, but you’ll notice that he’s at the bottom of the whole thing. Colombani has kindly lent me his file, and I’ve studied it closely. Here’s a map that he drew up—it’s very important. I’ve also read in one of his reports that no Czechs were living where the crimes were committed. But as a few Poles were living there, some people talked about a Polish gang, and they ascribed the murders at the farms to them.”

“What are you getting at?”

“When the group of workers that Carl belonged to arrived in France, the men scattered. He was the only one we find at this period in the regions just to the south of Amiens. That was where the first three crimes were committed, in each case on rich, isolated farms, and in each case the victims were elderly.”

“And the last crime?”

“A little farther east, toward St. Quentin. We’ll probably find out that Carl had a girl friend or an acquaintance in that neighborhood. He could get there on a bicycle. Three years later, when the gang was formed—”

“Where do you suppose it was formed?”

“I don’t know, but you’ll see that most of the people concerned turn up in the neighborhood of the Quai de Javel. Victor Poliensky was still working at Citroën a few weeks before the first attack.”

“You spoke of a leader.”

“First let me finish working out my theory. Before the death of Little Albert, or before the discovery of his body in the Place de la Concorde, I’m stressing the distinction, and you’ll see why—the gang, which by now was responsible for four massacres, enjoyed complete security. Nobody had a description of its members. Our only witness was a child who had seen a woman torturing her mother. As for the men, she had hardly seen them, and they were all wearing black scarves over their faces.”

“Did you find these scarves at Rue du Roi de Sicile?”

“No. The gang, then, was safe. Nobody would have dreamed of looking for the Picardy Killers in a slum in the ghetto. Isn’t that right, Colombani?”

“Absolutely.”

“Little Albert, who suddenly felt himself threatened by the men who were on his heels—don’t forget that when he called me up, he said there were several of them working in relays—Little Albert was stabbed with a knife in his own café, after appealing to me to protect him. He had meant to come and see me. That means he had something to tell me, and they knew this. One question arises: Why did anyone take the trouble to transport his body to the Place de la Concorde?”

They looked at him in silence, vainly seeking an answer to the question that Maigret had so often asked himself.

“Again, I refer to Colombani’s dossier, which gives very precise details. For each of the farm murders the gang used stolen vehicles, usually trucks. Almost all of these were taken from streets in the neighborhood of the Place Clichy, in any case in the Eighteenth Arrondissement, which is why we have been investigating that sector thoroughly. The vehicles were

always found next day in the same district, but a little way outside the city.”

“From which you conclude?”

“That the gang doesn’t own a car. A car has to be garaged somewhere, and that leaves traces.”

“So that the yellow car... ?”

“*The yellow car was not a stolen car.* We would have known, because the owner would have complained, particularly as it was almost a new car.”

“I understand,” murmured the chief, while Judge Comélieau, who did not understand, was frowning in some annoyance.

“I should have thought of it earlier. I did admit the possibility at one point, and then I rejected it because it seemed too complicated, and I maintain that truth is always simple. It was not Little Albert’s murderers who put his body in the Place de la Concorde.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll soon find out.”

“How?”

“I’ve had a notice put in the papers. Remember that Albert, at about five in the afternoon, when he realized we couldn’t help him, made a phone call that was not to us.”

“Do you think he was asking his friends to help?”

“Possibly. In any case he made a rendezvous with somebody. And that somebody didn’t turn up in time.”

“How do you know?”

“You’re forgetting that the yellow car was broken down on the Quai Henri IV for quite a while.”

“So that the two men traveling in it arrived too late?”

“Exactly.”

“Just a moment! I am consulting the dossier too. According to your fortuneteller, the car stopped opposite the Petit Albert from half-past eight till about nine. Now the body was not

deposited in the Place de la Concorde until one in the morning.”

“They may have gone back, Judge.”

“To get the victim of a crime they had not committed and deposit it somewhere else?”

“It’s possible. I’m not offering any explanation. I’m merely noting a fact.”

“And what about Albert’s wife, meanwhile?”

“Supposing they had, in fact, taken her away to safety?”

“Why was she not killed at the same time as her husband, since presumably she knew what he did, or at all events must have seen the murderer?”

“How do we know she hadn’t gone out? Some men, when they have to talk of serious business, get their wives out of the way.”

“Don’t you think, Inspector, that all this is taking *us* out of the way of the trail of our killers, who, as you say, are at present prowling around Paris?”

“What put us on their trail, Judge?”

“The body in the Place de la Concorde, obviously.”

“Why shouldn’t it bring us back to it again? You see, I believe that once we’ve understood, it won’t be too difficult to pick up the gang. But we’ve got to understand.”

“You think they killed this ex-waiter because he knew too much?”

“It’s very likely. And I’m trying to find out how he knew. When I’ve discovered that, I’ll also know *what* he knew.”

The chief nodded approval, with a smile, for he sensed the antagonism between the two men. As for Colombani, he was longing for his turn to speak.

“Perhaps the train?” he put in.

He knew his dossier inside out, and Maigret encouraged him.

“To what train are you referring?” inquired Comélieau.

“We’ve got—” Colombani was speaking now, urged on by a glance from his colleagues, “we’ve had a lead ever since the last of the crimes, but we’ve avoided publicizing it for fear of putting the gang on their guard. Please look at Map Number Five, which is attached to the dossier. The crime of January nineteenth was committed at a farm belonging to a widow, Madame Rival, and her daughter, who were both killed, unfortunately, as well as their farm hand and a servant girl. This farm is called Les Nonettes, no doubt because it is built on the ruins of a former convent, and it stands about five kilometers from the village. This village, Goderville, has a railway station at which slow trains stop. It’s on the main Paris-Brussels line. I don’t have to tell you that there are few passengers from Paris to Goderville —the trip takes hours, with stops at the smallest stations. Now on January nineteenth, at 8:17 p.m., a man got off the train, with a return ticket between Paris and Goderville.”

“Have you got his description?”

“A vague one. A young, well-dressed man.”

The judge thought it was his turn to find out something.

“A foreign accent?”

“He didn’t speak. He went through the village on the main road, and he wasn’t seen there again. But the next morning, at a few minutes past six, he took the train back to Paris from another small station, Moucher, twenty-one kilometers farther south. He didn’t hire a taxi. None of the villagers drove him. It’s hard to believe that he spent the night walking for pleasure. He must have passed close to Les Nonettes.”

Maigret had closed his eyes, overcome by a weariness he found hard to fight. He was liable to doze off standing up, and he had let his pipe go out.

“When we got this information,” Colombani went on, “we made inquiries about the ticket from the Nord Railway Company. All the tickets turned in on arrival are kept for a certain length of time.”

“And you didn’t find it?”

“It was not turned in at the Gare du Nord. In other words, a passenger must have got out on the wrong side of the train, or mixed with the crowd in some suburban station and got out without being seen, which is easy enough to do.”

“Is that what you were referring to, Monsieur Maigret?”

“Yes, Monsieur Comélieau.”

“Leading to what conclusion?”

“I don’t know. Little Albert might have been on the same train. He might have happened to be at the station.”

He shook his head and went on:

“No. They’d have started to hound him sooner.”

“So then?”

“Nothing! Besides, he must have had some material evidence, since they took the trouble to search his house from top to bottom after they’d murdered him. It’s complicated. And Victor came back to prowling around the bistro.”

“They probably hadn’t found what they were looking for?”

“In that case they would hardly have sent the half-wit. Victor acted on his own initiative, unknown to the rest, I’d swear that’s what happened. The proof is that they got rid of him deliberately when they knew the police were on his heels and he was liable to get them all caught. Excuse me, gentlemen. I’m completely exhausted.”

He turned to Colombani.

“Will I see you about five o’clock?”

“If you like.”

He seemed so weary, so vague, so lifeless that Judge Comélieau felt a pang of remorse and murmured:

“You got some pretty results, all the same.”

Then, when Maigret had gone out:

“He’s no longer young enough to spend nights without sleep. Really, why does he try to do everything by himself?”

He would have been astonished if he had seen Maigret, as he got into his taxi, pause before giving directions and finally announce:

“Quai de Charenton! I’ll tell you when to stop.”

He was worrying about Victor’s visit to the Petit Albert. All the way there he kept picturing the tall, redheaded man hurrying along with his catlike step, with Lucas on his heels.

“What’ll you have, Chief?”

“Whatever you like.”

Chevrier was playing his part to the hilt, and his wife must have proved a good cook, for there were a lot of customers in the room.

“I’m going upstairs. Will you ask Irma to come up?”

She followed him upstairs, wiping her hands on her apron. He looked around in the bedroom, which, with its windows wide open, smelled pleasantly clean.

“Where did you put all the things that were lying around?”

He had made an inventory of them with Moers. But then he had been looking for what the murderers might have left behind them. Now he was asking himself something more specific: what had Victor, personally, come in search of?

“I stuck everything into the top drawer of the dresser.”

Combs, a box of hairpins, some shells with the name of a seaside resort in Normandy, a paper knife advertising somebody’s goods, an automatic pencil that no longer worked, the odds and ends that clutter up most houses.

“Is everything in here?”

“Even a half-empty pack of cigarettes and an old broken pipe. Are we going to stay here much longer?”

“I don’t know, my dear. Are you getting bored?”

“I’m not, but some of the customers get too fresh, and it’s beginning to annoy my husband. He’s quite capable of hitting them...”

Maigret was still searching the drawer, and he pulled out a small harmonica of German make that had seen a lot of use. He put it into his pocket, to Irma’s great surprise.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“That’s all.”

A few minutes later, from downstairs, he called up Monsieur Loiseau, who was bewildered by his question:

“Tell me, monsieur, did Albert play the harmonica?”

“Not to my knowledge. He used to sing, but I’ve never heard of his playing any instrument.”

Maigret remembered the harmonica that had been found at Rue du Roi de Sicile. Next he called the landlord of the Lion d’Or.

“Did Victor play the harmonica?”

“He sure did. He even used to play it walking down the street.”

“Was he the only one who played it?”

“Serge Madok did too.”

“Did each have his own harmonica?”

“I think so. Yes, I’m sure of it—sometimes they played duets.”

There had only been one harmonica in the room at the Lion d’Or when Maigret had searched it.

The thing that half-witted Victor had come to look for in the house on the Quai de Charenton, without the knowledge of his accomplices, the thing that had eventually caused his death, was his harmonica.

EIGHT

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What happened that afternoon was later to be included among the stories that Madame Maigret liked to tell, with a smile, at family gatherings.

There was nothing extraordinary about the fact that Maigret came back at two and went to bed, refusing any lunch, although usually his first concern, at whatever time he got back to the apartment, was to go into the kitchen and lift the lids of the saucepans. Actually, he said he had had something to eat. Then, somewhat later, when she pressed him a little while he was undressing, he admitted that he had helped himself to a slice of ham in the kitchen of the restaurant on the Quai de Charenton.

She drew the blinds, made sure that her husband had everything he needed, and went out on tiptoe. Before the door was closed he was sound asleep.

She finished washing the dishes, tidied her kitchen, and then hesitated for a while before going back into the bedroom to get the knitting she had left there. She listened first, heard the sound of regular breathing, turned the knob cautiously, and tiptoed in, making no more noise than a Sister of Mercy. And at that point, still breathing as if he was asleep, he remarked in a muffled voice:

“Two and a half million in five months...”

His eyes were shut, his face was flushed. She thought he was talking in his sleep, but stood still so as not to wake him up.

“How would you set about spending that, eh?”

She dared not answer, convinced that he was dreaming. Without twitching his eyelids he repeated impatiently:

“Tell me, Madame Maigret.”

“Why, I don’t know,” she whispered. “How much did you say?”

“Two and a half million. Probably a lot more. That’s the least they collected on the farms, a lot of it in gold coins. Of course, there’s horse racing...”

He heaved himself over and opened one eye for a moment to stare at his wife.

“We always come back to horse racing, you see?”

She knew that he was not talking to her, but to himself. She waited for him to fall asleep again before creeping out as she had come in, even without her knitting. He was silent for a while, and she thought he had gone to sleep again.

“Listen, Madame Maigret. There’s one detail I’d like to know right away. Where was there any racing last Tuesday? In the Paris area, of course. Call up and ask!”

“Who’ll I call?”

“The Paris-Mutuel. You’ll find the number in the directory.”

The telephone was in the dining room, and the cord was too short for it to be carried into the bedroom. Madame Maigret always felt ill at ease when she had to speak into that little metal disc, particularly to somebody she didn’t know.

“Shall I say it’s from you?”

“If you like.”

“And if they ask who I am?”

“They won’t ask that.”

At this point he had both eyes open. So he must have awakened completely. She went into the next room, leaving the door open while she telephoned. It didn’t take long. The clerk who answered her must have been used to such questions and have known his racing calendar by heart, for he gave her the information without a moment’s hesitation.

But when Madame Maigret came back into the bedroom to repeat to Maigret what she had just been told, he was sound asleep, his breathing loud enough to be called snoring.

She was reluctant to wake him, and decided it was better to let him rest. She took the precaution of leaving the door open

between the two rooms, and from time to time glanced at the clock in surprise, for her husband's siestas were seldom long ones.

At four o'clock she went into the kitchen to put her soup on the stove. At half-past four she glanced into the bedroom, and her husband was still asleep; he must have been dreaming that he was deep in thought, for his brow was furrowed and his lips oddly pursed.

However, a little later, when she had sat down again in the dining room in her usual place by the window, she heard a voice remarking impatiently:

"Well, what about that telephone call?"

She hurried in and looked at him in astonishment; he was sitting up in bed.

"Is the line busy?" he asked in all seriousness.

That made a strange impression on Madame Maigret.

She was almost frightened, as if her husband's mind were wandering.

"Of course I made the telephone call. That was nearly three hours ago."

"What are you talking about? Why, what time is it?"

"A quarter to five."

He had not even noticed that he had been asleep. He thought he had just closed his eyes for a minute while she phoned.

"Where was it?"

"At Vincennes."

"What did I tell you?" he said triumphantly.

He had told nobody anything, but he had thought enough about it to come to the same thing.

"Call the Rue des Saussaies... 00-90... ask for Colombani's office..."

"What shall I say to him?"

“Nothing. I’ll speak to him, provided he hasn’t left yet.”

Colombani was still in his office. In any case, he was habitually late for his appointments. He good-naturedly agreed to visit his colleague at home instead of meeting him at Police Headquarters.

At his request, she had made him a cup of strong coffee, but it had not been enough to wake him completely. He had so much sleep to make up that his eyelids were still flushed and prickly. His skin felt tight. He hadn’t had the heart to get dressed, but had slipped on his trousers and bedroom slippers, and wore a dressing gown over his nightshirt, the collar of which was patterned with tiny red crosses.

They were sitting comfortably in the dining room, facing one another, with the flask of calvados between them, and against the white wall on the other side of the boulevard, in black letters, the names of Lhoste and Pépin.

They had known each other long enough not to stand on ceremony. Colombani, who was a little man, like most Corsicans, wore shoes with high heels and brightly colored ties, and had a ring with a real or fake diamond on his third finger. Because of this he had sometimes been taken for one of the men he was hunting for instead of a policeman.

“I’ve sent Janvier to cover the race tracks,” Maigret was saying as he smoked his pipe. “Where are the races today?”

“Vincennes.”

“Like last Tuesday. I wonder if it wasn’t at Vincennes that Little Albert’s adventures began. There’s been a preliminary check of the race tracks, but without any results. At that time we were only concerned with the ex-waiter. Today’s problem is different. We’ve got to inquire at the ticket windows, particularly at the expensive ones, the five-hundred or thousand-franc ones, whether they have among their regular clients a young man with a foreign accent.”

“Maybe the detectives on duty at the races have identified him?”

“I imagine he doesn’t go there by himself. Two and a half million in five months is a lot.”

“And there must have been far more than that,” Colombani declared. “In my report, I quoted only the figures we’re sure of. These are the sums that the gang unquestionably got their hands on. The farmers they murdered probably had other hiding-places they may have been forced to reveal under torture. I wouldn’t be surprised if the total came to four million or more.”

What could the squalid inhabitants of Rue du Roi de Sicile have spent their money on? Nothing on clothes. They rarely went out. They merely ate and drank. It takes some time to eat and drink a million francs’ worth, even five people.

And yet the expeditions had followed one another pretty closely.

“The boss must have kept most of it for himself.”

“I wonder why the rest let him get away with it?”

There were many other questions that Maigret asked himself, so much so that at certain times he felt he had done enough thinking, and would pass his hand across his forehead and stare out at something or other, such as the geranium in the distant window.

In spite of himself, he remained inextricably caught up in his inquiry, worrying about what was happening just then in and around Paris.

He had not yet had Maria transferred to the prison hospital. He had arranged for the midday edition of the newspapers to print the name of the hospital she had been taken to.

“I suppose you’ve posted some plain-clothes men.”

“There are four of them, not counting the men in uniform. There are several ways out of the hospital. Today’s visitors’ day.”

“You think they’ll try something?”

“I don’t know. They’re all so mad about her I wouldn’t be surprised if one of them, at least, stuck out his neck. Besides

each of them must think he's the father, you understand? So he'd want to see her and the child... It's a dangerous game. Not so much because of me as because of the others."

"I don't follow."

"They killed Victor Poliensky, didn't they? Why? Because through him they were in danger of getting caught. If another of the gang is on the point of falling into our hands, it'd surprise me if they let us catch him alive."

Maigret drew at his pipe, brooding. Colombani was saying, as he lit a gold-tipped cigarette:

"Surely they'll try to contact their boss first of all, especially if they're out of money."

Maigret looked at him dreamily, then his eyes hardened; he got up and thumped on the table, and exclaimed:

"Idiot! What an idiot! And I never thought of that!"

"But since you don't know where he lives..."

"Exactly! I'm willing to bet they don't know either. The fellow who organized this business and who gives those monsters their orders is sure to have taken all precautions. What did the landlord tell me? That he *used to come and give them instructions at Rue du Roi de Sicile before every expedition*. Good! Are you beginning to understand now?"

"Not quite."

"What do we know, or guess, about him? We're looking for him at the race tracks. And do you think they're any stupider than we are? You're right: at this very moment they're sure to be trying to contact him. Maybe to get money from him. Anyway, to let him know the latest developments, to ask him for advice or instructions. I bet not one of them spent last night in bed. Where do you suppose they'll have gone?"

"To Vincennes?"

"It's more than likely. If they haven't separated, they'll have sent one of their number there. If they have separated without making further plans, it wouldn't surprise me if all three of them met there. We've got a wonderful chance to nab them

even if we don't know them. It's easy enough to pick out fellows of that type in the crowd. To think that Janvier is down there and that I gave him no instructions to that effect!

"With thirty plain-clothes men around the enclosures and the paddock, we'd have got them. What time is it?"

"Too late. The sixth race finished half an hour ago."

"You see! One imagines he's thought of everything. When I went to bed at two o'clock I was convinced I'd done my utmost. There are men examining the Citroën payroll and searching the Javel district. They're stationed all around the Laënnec hospital. They're screening all the districts where men like our Czechs might be hiding. They're questioning tramps and vagrants. They're searching rooming houses. Moers, up there in his laboratory, is examining everything found at Rue du Roi de Sicile, down to the smallest hair.

"And meanwhile our gangsters have probably found a way to speak to their boss, at Vincennes."

Colombani must have been a fan of the turf himself, for he had not been far wrong. The telephone rang. Janvier was speaking.

"I'm still at Vincennes, Chief. I tried to get you at the Quai."

"Are the races over?"

"Half an hour ago. I stayed behind with the staff. It was hard to talk to them while the racing was on, because they have a hell of a lot to do. I wonder how they manage not to make mistakes. I asked them about those bets, you know. The attendant at one of the thousand-franc ticket windows was struck by my question. He's a fellow who's traveled in Central Europe and can recognize the languages. 'A Czech?' he said to me. 'I've got one who bets large sums regularly, almost always on outsiders. At first I thought he was someone from the embassy.' "

"Why?" Maigret inquired.

"Because he seems to be an upper-class type, the perfect gentleman, always beautifully dressed. He loses pretty regularly and never bats an eyelid, just gives a wry little smile.

If the attendant noticed him it wasn't so much on that account as because of the woman who's usually with him."

Maigret heaved a sigh of relief and glanced at Colombani with delight in his eyes, as if to say:

"We've got them!"

"A woman, eh!" he exclaimed into the telephone. "A foreigner?"

"A Parisian. Wait a minute! That's just why I didn't leave the track. If I could have spoken to the attendant before he'd have pointed out the couple, because they were there this afternoon."

"What's the woman like?"

"Well! She's young, very beautiful, it seems, dressed by the best couturiers. That's not all, Chief. The attendant says she's a movie actress. He doesn't often go to the movies. He doesn't know the names of the stars. He says she's probably not a star, but someone who plays supporting roles. I gave him a lot of names, but it didn't help."

"What time is it?"

"A quarter to six."

"Since you're at Vincennes, run over to Joinville. It's not far off. Ask your clerk to go with you."

"He's said he's at my disposal."

"There are some studios just beyond the bridge. Movie producers' offices usually keep photos of the actors, even bit players, and they consult this collection when they're casting a new film. You get me?"

"I get you. Where can I call you back?"

"At home."

He sat down in his armchair again, relaxed.

"Maybe it'll work," he said.

"Provided it *is* our Czech, of course."

He filled the small gold-rimmed glasses, emptied out his pipe, and filled another.

“I’ve got the feeling we’re going to have a hectic night. Have you sent for the little girl?”

“She started at three o’clock. I’ll go and pick her up myself at the Gare du Nord.”

The little girl from the Manceau farm, the only person to have miraculously escaped the slaughter and to have seen one of the attackers: Maria, the woman who was now lying in a hospital bed with her baby beside her.

The telephone once more. It had become almost agonizing to lift it.

“Hello?”

Once again Maigret glanced toward his colleague, but this time with a look of annoyance. He spoke in muffled tones. For quite a while he merely replied, at almost regular intervals:

“Yes... yes... yes...”

Colombani tried hard to understand, all the more annoyed at guessing nothing, because he could hear a buzz going on in the telephone, with an occasional syllable detached from the rest.

“In ten minutes? Yes, yes. Exactly as I promised.”

Why did Maigret seem to be controlling himself? Once again his attitude had completely changed. He was quivering with impatience like a child waiting for its Christmas presents, but he was trying to appear calm, even to put on a sullen expression.

When he hung up again, instead of speaking to Colombani, he opened the door that led into the kitchen.

“Your aunt’s coming with her husband,” he announced.

“What? What are you talking about? But—”

He was winking vainly at her.

“I know. It puzzled me too. It must be something serious and unexpected. She wants to talk to us urgently.”

He pushed his head through the door and made fresh faces at his wife, which she did not know how to interpret.

“Well, well! That’s very surprising. I hope nothing awful’s happened.”

“Maybe it’s about the inheritance?”

“What inheritance?”

“Her uncle’s.”

When he came back toward Colombani the latter wore a sly smile.

“Excuse me, old man. My wife’s aunt is arriving any minute. I’ve barely got time to get dressed. I don’t want to send you away, but you understand...”

The inspector from the Sûreté emptied his glass in one swallow, rose, and wiped his mouth.

“Of course, I understand. Will you call me up if you’ve got anything new?”

“I promise.”

“I’ve got the feeling you’ll be calling me up pretty soon. I even wonder if I should go back to Rue des Saussaies. No! If you don’t mind, I’ll just go over to the Quai des Orfèvres.”

“All right! I’ll contact you soon.”

Maigret almost hustled him onto the landing. Then, once the door was closed, he walked swiftly through the room and went to look out of the window. On the left, beyond Lhoste and Pépin, there was a combined wine and coal merchant’s, an *Auvergnat’s* shop, painted yellow, with a green plant beside the door, on which he now fixed his eyes.

“Was it all nonsense?” asked Madame Maigret.

“Of course! I didn’t want Colombani to meet the people who are coming up in a few minutes.”

While he spoke, he automatically put his hand down on the window sill, just where Colombani had stood a little while before. There was some paper there, a newspaper. He glanced

down at it and noticed that it was folded on the want-ads page. One of these was framed with a blue pencil mark.

“The dog!” he growled between his teeth.

For an old rivalry exists between the Sûreté Nationale and Police Headquarters, and a man from Rue des Saussaies delights in playing tricks on a colleague from the Quai des Orfèvres.

Colombani, in any case, had not taken a spiteful revenge on Maigret for that fake story about an aunt. He had merely left behind him the proof that he had not been fooled.

The notice, which had appeared that morning in all the papers and at midday in the special racing editions, read, with the conventional abbreviations:

“Albert’s friends, for your safety’s sake, urgently contact Maigret at home, 132 Bd. Richard Lenoir. Absolute secrecy promised.”

It was they who had just telephoned from the shop across the street, to make sure that the message was neither a hoax nor a trap, to hear Maigret repeat his promise and finally to make sure that the coast was clear.

“You go out for a little walk around the neighborhood, Madame Maigret. Don’t be in too much of a hurry. Put on your hat with the green feather.”

“Why my hat with the green feather?”

“Because spring is on the way.”

While they were crossing the street, looking like a couple of men on important business, Maigret was watching them through the window, but from a distance he was able to recognize only one of them.

A few minutes earlier he had known absolutely nothing about the men who were going to turn up, not even to what social group they belonged. He would have bet, however, that they too frequented race tracks.

“I suppose Colombani is watching them from somewhere or other,” he grumbled.

And Colombani, once on the trail, was quite capable of leaving him behind.

Particularly as Colombani was no doubt acquainted, even better than himself, with Boxer Jo.

Jo was small and sturdy, with a broken nose and drooping eyelids over light blue eyes, always dressed in checked suits and loud ties. He was invariably to be found at apéritif time in one of the small bars on Avenue Wagram.

Ten times at the very least Maigret had had him up in his office, in connection with some trouble or other, and each time he had got away with it.

Was he really dangerous? He would gladly have had people believe it, and he liked to pose as a terror. It was a matter of vanity with him to pass for a member of the underworld, but the underworld viewed him with suspicion, if not with a certain contempt.

Maigret went and opened the door to them and set out fresh glasses on the table. They came forward uneasily, mistrustful in spite of everything, peering into the corners and looking with concern at the closed doors.

“Don’t be afraid, boys. There’s nobody hidden taking notes, no dictaphone. Look! This is my bedroom.”

He showed them the rumpled bed.

“Here’s the bathroom. That’s the closet. And here’s the kitchen, which Madame Maigret has just left in honor of your visit.”

There was a good smell of simmering soup, and a chicken, ready to roast, was on the kitchen table.

“This door? This is the last. The guest room. It’s not very well aired. It smells stuffy because guests never sleep in it and it’s only used by my sister-in-law two or three nights a year.

“Let’s get down to business!”

He held out his glass to meet with theirs. At the same time he cast an inquiring glance at Jo’s companion.

“This is Ferdinand,” the ex-boxer explained.

The chief inspector searched his memory in vain. That long, thin figure, that face with the huge nose and the lively little eyes like a mouse’s, did not remind him of anything, any more than the man’s name.

“He’s got a garage near the Porte Maillot. A small one.”

It was funny to see them both standing there, reluctant to sit down, not because they were scared but from a kind of caution. That sort of man dislikes being too far from a door.

“You think there’s some kind of danger.”

“Yes, two kinds—for one thing, the Czechs might spot you, and in that case I wouldn’t rate your chances very high.”

Jo and Ferdinand stared at one another in astonishment, thinking they had misunderstood.

“What Czechs?”

For there had been no mention of Czechs in the papers.

“The Picardy gang.”

This time they understood, and suddenly grew more serious.

“We haven’t done anything to them.”

“H’m! We’ll talk about that later. It would be much easier to talk if you were sitting down.”

Jo grew brave and sat down in an armchair, but Ferdinand, who did not know Maigret, only perched half his backside on the edge of a chair.

“There’s a second danger,” remarked the chief inspector, lighting his pipe and watching them. “Didn’t you notice anything today?”

“The place is thick with cops. No offense meant!”

“No offense taken. Not only is it thick with cops, as you say, but most of the plain-clothes men are on the lookout for a certain number of people, including two gentlemen who own a certain yellow car.”

Ferdinand smiled.

“I imagine it’s no longer yellow and that the license plate has been changed. We’ll let that pass! If detectives from Police Headquarters had picked you up first, I might have been able to keep you out of trouble. But did you see the man who just left here?”

“Colombani,” grunted Jo.

“Did he see you?”

“We waited till he got on the bus.”

“That means the city police are after you too. With those boys, you couldn’t have avoided Judge Comélieu.”

This was a name to conjure with, for the two men knew this magistrate’s implacability, at any rate by reputation.

“But by coming here to see me as you’ve done, we can have a friendly talk.”

“We don’t know hardly anything.”

“What you do know will be enough. Were you friends of Albert’s?”

“He was a good guy.”

“Liked a joke, didn’t he?”

“We met him at the races.”

“I thought so.”

That placed the two men. Ferdinand’s garage must seldom be open to the public. Maybe he did not sell stolen cars, for that requires complicated equipment to disguise them, and a whole organization. Moreover, the two men were of the sort who are not eager to take risks.

More likely he bought old jalopies cheap and fixed them up so that they looked smart enough to fool suckers.

In bars, at race tracks, in hotel lounges, one meets simple souls who are not averse to making a sensational bargain. Sometimes they can be finally persuaded by a whispered hint that the car has been stolen from a film star.

“Were you both at Vincennes last Tuesday?”

They looked at one another again, not to plan their answer but in an effort to remember.

“Wait a second. Ferdinand, wasn’t it Tuesday you won on Semiramis?”

“Yes.”

“We *were* there, then.”

“And Albert?”

“Now I remember. It was the day it poured during the third race. Albert was there, I saw him in the distance.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“No, because he wasn’t in the enclosure, but in the paddock. We always stick to the enclosure. So did he, usually. That Tuesday he’d brought his wife along. It was their wedding anniversary or something. He’d talked about it a few days before. He’d even thought of buying a cheap car, and Ferdinand promised to dig one up for him. On the level!”

“And afterward?”

“After what?”

“What happened the next day?”

They consulted each other’s eyes again, and Maigret had to show them the way.

“Did he call you at the garage on Wednesday about five o’clock?”

“No. At Le Pélican, Avenue de Wagram. We’re almost always there then.”

“Now, boys, I’d like to know exactly, word for word, if you can, what he said. Who answered?”

“I did,” said Jo.

“Think carefully. Take your time.”

“He sounded like he was in a hurry, or excited.”

“I know.”

“At first I didn’t get what it was all about, because he talked so fast he mixed everything up, like he was afraid of being cut off.”

“I know that too. He called me up four or five times the same day...”

“Oh!”

Jo and Ferdinand gave up trying to understand.

“Then if he called you up, you must know about it.”

“Go ahead.”

“He told me some men were following him and he was afraid, but that he might have found a way of getting rid of them.”

“Did he tell you what it was?”

“No, but he seemed to like the idea.”

“Then?”

“He said, more or less, that it was a rough proposition, but we might get something out of it. Don’t forget, Chief Inspector, you promised...”

“I’ll repeat my promise. You’ll leave this house as freely as you came in, and nobody will bother you, whatever you tell me, if you tell me the whole truth.”

“You know it as well as we do, don’t you?”

“More or less.”

“O.K. Can’t be helped! Albert said: ‘Come and see me at eight o’clock at my place. We can talk.’ ”

“What did you think he meant?”

“Wait. He just had time to say before he hung up, ‘I’ll send Nine to the movies.’ Do you get me? That meant it was serious.”

“Just a minute. Had Albert ever done a job with you two?”

“Never. What could he have done? You know the sort of job we do. Not always on the right side of the law. Albert was

respectable.”

“All the same it occurred to him to use what he’d found out.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Wait a minute! I’m trying to recall his exact words, but I can’t get them. He said something about the gang from up North.”

“And you decided to go to the rendezvous?”

“What else could we do?”

“Listen, Jo. Don’t put on an act. For once you’re safe, and you can level. You thought your pal Albert spotted the men from the Picardy gang. You knew from the papers that they’d got several million. And you wondered if there wasn’t some way of getting your share. Was that it?”

“I thought that was what Albert thought.”

“All right. We agree. And then?”

“We went there together.”

“And you had a breakdown on Boulevard Henri IV, which makes me think the yellow Citroën wasn’t as new as it looked.”

“We’d fixed it up to sell it. We didn’t mean to use it ourselves.”

“You got to the Quai de Charenton a good half hour late. The shutters were closed. You opened the door, which was unlocked.”

They looked at one another again, mournfully.

“And you found your friend Albert had been knifed.”

“That’s right.”

“What did you do?”

“We first thought he wasn’t dead, because the body was still warm.”

“And then?”

“We could see the house had been searched. We thought of Nine, who’d be coming back from the movies. There’s only one movie near there, at Charenton, by the canal. We went there.”

“What were you planning to do?”

“We really didn’t know, that’s the truth. We weren’t feeling too good, either of us. For one thing it’s not much fun having to tell a woman a piece of news like that. Then we wondered if the men from the gang had spotted us. We talked that over, me and Ferdinand.”

“And you decided to take Nine to the country?”

“Yes.”

“Is she far away?”

“Close to Corbeil, at an inn on the Seine where we go fishing sometimes. Ferdinand’s got a boat there.”

“Didn’t she want to see Albert?”

“We wouldn’t let her. When we drove back along the quay that night there was nobody around the house. There was still light under the door, because we forgot to turn it off.”

“Why did you take the body away?”

“That was Ferdinand’s idea.”

Maigret turned to the latter, who was hanging his head, and repeated; “Why?”

“I can’t explain it. I was mixed up. We’d had a couple of drinks at the inn to cheer us up. I thought the neighbors had seen the car and maybe us. And that if it was known that it was Albert who’d been killed, the cops would look for Nine and she wouldn’t be able to keep her mouth shut.”

“You laid a false trail.”

“You can call it that. The police don’t take much interest in a crime if it looks open and shut, like a man getting knifed in the street for his money.”

“Was it you who thought of the hole in the raincoat?”

“We had to, so it’d look like he’d been knocked off in the street.”

“And of smashing his face in?”

“We had to. He couldn’t feel anything. We thought if we did that, the whole thing’d be shelved and we’d be safe.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all, I promise. Isn’t it, Jo? Next day I painted the car blue and changed the license plate.”

They were obviously getting ready to go.

“Just a minute. Since then, have you received anything?”

“Received what?”

“An envelope, with something inside it.”

“No.”

They were sincere. The question had genuinely surprised them. Moreover Maigret, while he asked it, was finding a likely solution to the problem that had preoccupied him during the last few days.

Jo had unwittingly provided that solution a few minutes ago. Hadn’t Albert told him over the phone that he had just thought of a way of getting rid of the men that were after him?

Had he not asked for an envelope in the *brasserie* where he had last been seen, immediately after the phone call to his friends?

He had on him, in his pocket, something that would compromise the Czechs. One of them was keeping constant watch on him. Surely one way to put him off the scent would be to throw an envelope, quite openly, into a mailbox.

No problem about slipping the document into the envelope. But what address had he written?

Maigret lifted the phone and called Headquarters.

“Hello! Who’s speaking? Bodin? Here’s a job. Urgent! How many men are there in the office? What? Only four? One has to stay on duty, yes. Take the other three. Divide all the post

offices in Paris between you. Wait a minute! Including the one at Charenton. Take care of that one yourself. Ask the clerks in General Delivery. There must be somewhere, in the name of Albert Rochain, a letter that's been waiting several days. Get it and bring it to me. No, not at home. I'll be at the office in half an hour."

He looked at the two men with a smile.

"Another drop?"

They were probably not partial to calvados, but they accepted out of politeness.

"O.K. for us to go?"

They were still suspicious, and they got to their feet like schoolboys when the teacher announces a recess.

"Will we get into trouble?"

"You won't have any at all. I'm asking you not to say anything to Nine."

"Will she get into trouble?"

"Why should she?"

"Go easy on her, will you? If you knew how much she loved her Albert!"

When the door closed after them, Maigret went to put out the gas, for the soup was boiling over and beginning to spill onto the stove.

Those rascals had lied a little, he suspected. According to Dr. Paul, they had not waited till Nine was safe before altering their friend's appearance. But that made no difference to the case, and they had displayed enough good will, on the whole, for the inspector not to harass them about it. After all, such people have their own sense of shame, like anybody else.

NINE

« ^ »

The office was blue with smoke. Colombani was sitting in one corner with his legs stretched out. A short while before, the

chief of Police Headquarters had been there too. Plain-clothes men came in and left. Judge Comélie had just called. Maigret picked up the phone once more.

“Hello, Marchand?... Maigret... Yes, the real one... What’s that? You’ve got another friend of that name?... A count? No, no relation of mine!”

It was seven o’clock. He was speaking to the general secretary of the Folies Bergère.

“What do you want with me, my dear fellow?”... Marchand was lisping. “Gracious, that won’t be easy! I barely have time to get a bite around the corner before the doors open... Unless you eat with me? At the Chope Montmartre, maybe?... In ten minutes?... I’ll be seeing you, my dear fellow.”

Janvier was in the office, in great excitement. It was he who had just brought from Joinville a large handsome photograph, like the ones in actors’ dressing rooms. This one was signed, moreover, in a tall, self-confident hand: Francine Latour.

She was a good-looking girl, and very young. Her address was on the back: 121 Rue de Longchamp, Passy.

“Seems she’s in the show now,” Janvier had announced.

“Did the race-track clerk recognize her?”

“Definitely. I’d have brought him along, but he was already late and he’s scared of his wife. But if we need him, we can call him at home any time. He lives near here, on the Ile St. Louis, and he has a phone.”

Francine Latour had a phone too. Maigret called her apartment, determined to hang up without speaking if anyone answered. But as he had expected, she wasn’t home.

“Will you go over there, Janvier? Take along someone who’s sharp with you. No matter what you do, don’t attract attention.”

“Do you want us to search the place?”

“Not yet. Wait while I phone. One of you wait in a bar near the place. Call up here and give me the number.”

He was frowning in his effort to remember everything. The visit to the Citroën factory had produced one result: Serge Madok had worked there for nearly two years.

He went into the detectives' room:

"Listen, boys. I'll probably need a lot of men tonight. You'd better all stay around. Get your dinner in relays, or send out for sandwiches and drinks. See you later. Are you coming, Colombani?"

"I thought you were having dinner with Marchand?"

"You know him too, don't you?"

Marchand, who had started out by peddling returned tickets at theater doors, was now one of the best-known figures in Paris. He still had his common manners and coarse speech. He was in the restaurant, elbows on the table and a large menu in his hand, and as the two men came up he was saying to the maître d'hôtel:

"Something light, my dear Georges... let's see... have you any partridge?"

"Aux *choux*, Monsieur Marchand."

"Sit down, my dear fellow. Hello! So the Sûreté Nationale has joined the party too. A third place, my dear Georges. What do you say to partridge *aux choux*, you two? Wait a minute! Before that let's have some small trout, *au bleu*. Are they alive, Georges?"

"You can see them in the tank, Monsieur Marchand."

"A few hors d'oeuvres, to help us wait. That's all. A soufflé to end up with, if you insist."

This was his passion. Even when he was by himself he ate that kind of meal twice a day. And this was what he called something light, a snack. Maybe after the theater he would go and have dinner.

"Well, my dear fellow, what can I do for you? Nothing wrong with my show, I hope."

It was too soon to talk seriously. The wine waiter arrived, and Marchand spent a few minutes choosing wines.

“I’m listening, boys.”

“If I tell you something, can you keep quiet about it?”

“You forget, old boy, that I’m probably the man who knows the most secrets in all of Paris. Just think, the fate of hundreds, no, thousands, of happy homes is in my hands. Keep quiet? I do nothing else.”

Oddly enough, it was perfectly true; he talked from morning till night, but he never said more than he intended to say.

“Do you know Francine Latour?”

“She’s in a couple of our sketches with Dréan.”

“What do you think of her?”

“What do you expect me to think of her? She’s just a kid. Ask me again ten years from now.”

“Any talent?”

Marchand stared at the chief inspector with comical astonishment.

“Why do you expect her to have talent? I don’t know how old she is, but she can’t be more than twenty. And already she’s dressed by couturiers, and I think she’s even started to wear diamonds. Anyway last week she turned up in a mink coat. What more do you want?”

“Has she got lovers?”

“She has a gentleman friend, like everybody else.”

“Do you know him?”

“You bet I know him.”

“A foreigner, isn’t he?”

“Nowadays they are all foreigners. You’d think France produces nothing but faithful husbands.”

“Listen to me, Marchand. It’s more serious than you think.”

“When are you picking him up?”

“Tonight, I hope. It’s not what you think.”

“Anyway, he’s an old hand. If I remember right, he’s been up twice for passing phony checks or something like that. He seems to be solvent now.”

“What’s his name?”

“Everybody backstage calls him Monsieur Jean. His real name is Bronsky. He’s a Czech.”

“A worthless one,” added Colombani, while Maigret shrugged his shoulders.

“He dabbled in movies for a while. I think he’s still interested in them,” went on Marchand, who could have recited the life history of all the well-known people in Paris, including the most notorious ones. “A good-looking fellow, and generous. Women adore him, men don’t trust him because of his charm.”

“Is he in love?”

“I think so. Anyway, he never leaves the girl’s side. They say he’s jealous.”

“Where do you suppose he is now?”

“If there’s any racing this afternoon, the chances are he went there with her. A girl who’s been getting her dresses on the Rue de la Paix for the last four or five months, and who’s wearing a new mink coat, doesn’t get tired of the track. They’re probably having a drink in some bar on the Champs Elysées. She doesn’t go on till half-past nine. She gets to the theater around nine. So they’ve got time for dinner at Fouquet’s, Maxim’s or Ciro’s. If you want to find them...”

“Not just now. Does Bronsky bring her to the theater?”

“Almost always. He takes her to her dressing room, hangs around backstage for a while, then settles down at the bar in the main hall and talks to Félix. After her second sketch he goes back to her dressing room, and when she’s ready he takes her out. They nearly always have some party or other to go to.”

“Does he live with her?”

“Probably, old man. You’d better ask the concierge that one.”

“Have you seen him lately?”

“Him? I saw him last night.”

“Did it strike you he was more on edge than usual?”

“People like that, you know, are always more or less on edge. When you’re walking a tightrope... well, if I get what you mean, the rope’s about to snap. Too bad for the kid. Of course, now that she’s all decked out, she’ll manage all right, and maybe she’ll find something better.”

While he spoke, Marchand went on eating and drinking, wiped his mouth with his napkin, exchanged friendly greetings with people coming in or going out, and even found time to summon the maître d’hôtel or the wine waiter.

“Do you know how he started?”

And Marchand, whose own beginnings were often recalled by gossip-mongering newspapers, retorted somewhat curtly:

“That, my friend, is not a question you put to a gentleman.”

However, he continued a few moments later:

“All I know is that at one time he ran an agency for extras.”

“Long ago?”

“A few months ago. I could find out.”

“Don’t bother. I’d rather you didn’t refer to our conversation, particularly tonight.”

“Are you coming to the theater?”

“No.”

“I’d just as soon you didn’t. I’d have asked you not to carry on your little business in my place.”

“I don’t want to take any chances, Marchand. My picture and Colombani’s have been in the papers too often. The man’s smart enough, according to what you say and what I know about him, to smell out any of my plain-clothes men.”

“You’re taking this whole thing seriously, aren’t you? Help yourself to partridge.”

“There may be trouble.”

“Oh!”

“There’s been some already. Plenty, in fact.”

“O.K. Don’t tell me a thing. I’d rather read all about it tomorrow or the day after in the papers. I might find it awkward if he asked me to have a drink with him tonight. Eat up, lads. What d’you think of this Châteauneuf... ? They only have fifty bottles left and I’ve had them reserved for myself. There are still forty-nine. Shall I send for another?”

“No, thanks. We’re going to be on the job all night.”

They left him a quarter of an hour later, somewhat overcome by too large a meal, too lavishly washed down.

“I hope he holds his tongue,” Colombani grunted.

“He’ll hold it.”

“By the way, Maigret, did your aunt give you any useful hints?”

“Very useful. To tell you the truth, I know nearly all of Little Albert’s story now.”

“I guessed as much. There’s nothing like a woman for being well informed. Particularly an aunt from the country. Am I allowed to hear about it?”

They had a little time to kill. The respite was welcome before a night that promised to be lively, and they walked on the sidewalk conversing.

“You were right this afternoon. We could probably have picked them all up at Vincennes. If only Jean Bronsky doesn’t suspect we’ve got him cornered!”

“We’ll do what we can, won’t we?”

They reached Police Headquarters about half-past nine, and an important piece of news was awaiting them. An excited plain-clothes man was there.

“Carl Lipschitz is dead, Chief Inspector. It happened right in front of me. I was standing in the darkness, on Rue de Sèvres, about a hundred yards from the hospital. For a while I’d been hearing noises on my right, as if somebody was there in the darkness waiting to move forward. Then I heard running footsteps and a shot. It was so close I first thought they were shooting at me, and I automatically grabbed my revolver. I could just make out a body falling and a figure running away. I fired.”

“Did you kill him?”

“I aimed at his legs, and the second time I was lucky enough to score a bull’s-eye. The man who was escaping fell too.”

“Who was it?”

“The kid, the one they call Pietr. He didn’t have to be carried far, with the hospital just across the street.

“So Pietr fired at Carl?”

“Yes.”

“Were they together?”

“No. I don’t think so. I think Pietr was following Carl and shot him down.”

“What did he say?”

“The boy? Nothing. He won’t open his mouth. His eyes are bright and he’s feverish. He seemed glad to be taken into the hospital and kept looking all around in the corridors.”

“Because Maria’s there, of course. Is his wound serious?”

“The bullet went into his left knee. He’s being operated on right now.”

“What about his pockets?”

There were two separate little heaps on Maigret’s desk; they had been carefully prepared.

“The first one is from Carl’s pockets. The other’s from the kid’s.”

“Is Moers upstairs?”

“He says he’s going to spend the night in the lab.”

“Ask him to come down. Will somebody go up to Records? I want the card and the files of Jean Bronsky. I haven’t got his fingerprints, but he’s been convicted twice and must have spent eighteen months in prison.”

He also sent some men to Rue de Provence, across the street from the Folies Bergère, instructing them on no account to let themselves be seen.

“Don’t go until you’ve seen Bronsky’s photograph. Don’t arrest him unless he tries to get away by train or plane. I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Carl Lipschitz’s wallet contained forty-two thousand-franc notes, an identity card in his own name, and another card bearing an Italian name: Filipino. He obviously didn’t smoke, for no cigarettes, pipe, or lighter had been found on him, but there were a pocket flashlight, two handkerchiefs, one of them filthy, a movie ticket with that day’s date, a penknife, and an automatic.

“You see,” Maigret observed to Colombani, “we imagined we’d thought of everything.”

He pointed to the movie ticket.

“And they had this bright idea. A lot better than hanging around the streets. You can spend hours there in the dark. In the boulevard movies, open all night, you can even have a nap.”

In Pietr’s pockets there was only thirty-eight francs in coins. The wallet contained two photographs, one of Maria, a small passport photo that must have been taken the previous year, when her hair was different, and a picture of two peasants, a man and a woman, sitting in the doorway of their home, somewhere in Central Europe as far as one could judge from the style of the house.

No identity papers. Some cigarettes. A lighter. A small blue notebook in which a number of pages were covered with close writing in pencil.

“It looks like verse.”

“I’m sure it is verse.”

Moers was delighted to see the two heaps, which he was to carry off to his lair under the rafters. A detective put Bronsky’s file on the desk.

The man’s photograph, hard and merciless as all police photographs are, didn’t quite correspond to Marchand’s description, for the man, who was still young, had drawn features, a two-day beard, and a protruding Adam’s apple.

“Has Janvier called in?”

“He said everything was quiet and you could reach him at Passy 62-41.”

“Get the number for me.”

He was reading the file half aloud. It told him that Bronsky was born in Prague and was thirty-five years old. He had studied at the University of Vienna, then had lived for a few years in Berlin. There he had married one Hilda Braun, but when he came to France at the age of twenty-eight, with his papers in order, he was alone. He already described himself as a film producer by profession, and his first address had been at a hotel on Boulevard Raspail.

“Janvier’s on the phone, Chief.”

“Is that you, my boy? Have you had dinner? Listen carefully. I’m going to send two men around in a car.”

“There are two of us here already!” the sergeant protested, somewhat hurt.

“That doesn’t matter. Listen to what I’m telling you. When they come, leave them outside. It’s important that they shouldn’t be seen. Above all, they mustn’t let their presence be suspected by anyone walking home or getting out of a taxi. You and your friend go in the house. Wait there till no more lights are in the concierge’s lodge. What’s the building like?”

“New, modern, very smart. A big white façade and a wrought-iron door lined with glass.”

“Good. Go upstairs, give some name or other.”

“How’ll I find the apartment?”

“Well, there must be some dairy in the neighborhood that delivers milk. Wake up the milkman if you have to. Give him a story—a romantic one.”

“I get you.”

“Do you still know how to pick a lock?... Go on in. Don’t turn on any lights. Take cover in a corner, be ready, both of you, to move in if you have to.”

“O.K., Chief,” sighed poor Janvier, who was no doubt going to spend hours motionless in the darkness of an unfamiliar apartment.

“Above all, no smoking!”

He smiled at his own unkindness. Then he picked two men to go on duty on Rue de Longchamp.

“Take your guns. You can’t tell how things are going to turn out.”

A glance at Colombani. The two men understood each other. They were dealing not with a crook but with the leader of a gang of killers; they had no right to take any chances.

It would have been easier to make an arrest at the bar of the Folies Bergère, for instance. But it was impossible to guess Bronsky’s reactions. He might be armed, and he was probably the kind of man who would defend himself, perhaps even fire into the crowd to take advantage of the ensuing panic.

“Who’ll volunteer to go and order some beer from the Brasserie Dauphine? And sandwiches.”

That meant that Police Headquarters was going to have one of its big nights. In both offices of Maigret’s department the atmosphere was like that of a local police station. Everybody was smoking, everybody was busy. The phones were not in use.

“The Folies Bergère, please.”

It took a long time to get Marchand on the phone. They had had to get him from the floor of the stage, where he was

settling an argument between two nude dancers.

“Yes, my dear fellow...” he began without knowing who was on the line.

“Maigret.”

“Well?”

“Is he there?”

“I saw him just a minute ago.”

“All right. Don’t say anything. Just call if he leaves by himself.”

“I get you. Don’t spoil his looks, will you?”

“Somebody else will probably see to that,” was Maigret’s enigmatic reply.

In a few moments, at the Folies, Francine Latour would go on-stage with Dréan, the funny man, and then no doubt her lover would go into the hot auditorium for an instant, and then stand around in the lounge, with the other regulars, listening with half an ear to the dialogue, which he knew by heart, and the laughter from the galleries.

Maria was still lying in her hospital room, uneasy, furious because, in conformity with the regulations, her baby had been taken away from her for the night, and two plain-clothes men were on guard in the corridor; there was another, a single one, in another wing of Laënnec, to which Pietr had just been brought back from the operating room.

Judge Comélieau, sounding rather agitated—he was visiting friends on Boulevard St. Germain, and had excused himself for a moment to telephone—called Maigret.

“Still nothing?”

“Not much. Carl Lipschitz is dead.”

“Did one of your men shoot him?”

“No, one of his own. Young Pietr got a bullet in the leg from one of my men.”

“So there’s only one left.”

“Yes, Serge Madok. And the boss.”

“And you still don’t know who he is?”

“His name is Jean Bronsky.”

“What name did you say?”

“Bronsky.”

“Isn’t he a producer?”

“I don’t know if he’s a producer, but he dabbles in movies.”

“Are you after him?”

“He’s at the Folies Bergère now.”

“What did you say?”

“I said the Folies Bergère.”

“Aren’t you going to arrest him?”

“Later. We’ve got plenty of time. I’d just as soon limit the damage, you understand?”

“Make a note of my number. I’ll stay with my friends till about midnight. Then I’ll wait for your call at home.”

“You’ll probably have time to get some sleep.”

Maigret was not mistaken. Jean Bronsky and Francine Latour first took a taxi to Maxim’s, where they had supper together. Maigret was still in his office at the Quai des Orfères, following their movements, and the waiter from the Brasserie Dauphine had come in for the second time with his tray. The room was full of dirty glasses and half-eaten sandwiches, and the reek of tobacco was suffocating. In spite of the heat, however, Colombani was still wearing the camel’s-hair coat that was almost a uniform for him, and a hat pushed back as usual.

“Aren’t you going to send for the woman?”

“What woman?”

“Nine, Albert’s wife.”

Maigret shook his head, looking annoyed. Surely that was his own business. He was quite willing to collaborate with the

Rue des Saussaies people on the condition that they let him alone.

For the time being he seemed to be thinking things over. As Judge Coméliau had just told him, it was entirely up to him to arrest Jean Bronsky when he wanted to. He remembered something he had said at the beginning of the investigation, he couldn't remember to whom, with unaccustomed gravity, "This time we're dealing with killers."

Killers who realized, all of them, that they had nothing left to lose. So much so that if they were picked up in the middle of a crowd, and if that crowd were told that they belonged to the Picardy gang, the police wouldn't be able to prevent a lynching.

After what they had done on the farms, any jury would give them the death penalty, as they were well aware; only Maria, for the child's sake, might possibly hope for a reprieve from the president of the republic.

Would this be granted? It was doubtful. There was the evidence of the little girl who had survived, there were those burned feet and breasts. While her female insolence and even her savage beauty would in themselves prejudice the jury against her.

Civilized men are afraid of wild beasts, especially those of their own species, those who remind them of bygone epochs of life in the forests.

Jean Bronsky was a wild beast of an even more dangerous sort, a wild beast dressed by the best tailor in the Place Vendôme, a wild beast in a silk shirt, who had studied at a university and who had his hair trimmed and curled every morning like a lady of fashion.

"You're playing a tricky game," Colombani remarked at one point, as Maigret was waiting patiently beside one of the phones.

"I *am* playing a tricky game."

"And suppose he slips through your fingers?"

“I’d rather that happened than see one of my men shot down.”

After all, what was the point of leaving Chevrier and his wife in their bistro on the Quai de Charenton? He ought to call them. They would be in bed. Maigret smiled, shrugged his shoulders. You never knew; this bit of playacting might be exciting for them, and there was no reason why they shouldn’t play at proprietor and proprietress for a few hours longer.

“Hello, Chief? They’ve just gone into Chez Florence.”

The fashionable Montmartre night club. Champagne was obligatory there. Probably Francine Latour had a new dress or some new jewelry to show off. She was very young, not yet tired of that sort of life. You can still see rich titled old ladies who have their own mansions on Avenue du Bois or the Faubourg St. Germain, and who have been haunting the same night clubs for the past forty years!

“Let’s go!” Maigret suddenly decided.

He took his revolver out of the drawer of his desk, and made sure it was loaded, while Colombani watched him with a faint smile.

“Are you letting me come with you?”

It was kind of Maigret. The whole thing was taking place in his area. It was he who had unearthed the Picardy gang. He could have kept the job for himself and his men, and thus the Quai des Orfèvres would have scored another point against the Rue des Saussaies.

“Have you got your gun?”

“I always carry it in my pocket.”

Maigret rarely did so.

As they went across the courtyard Colombani pointed to one of the police cars.

“No! I’d rather take a taxi. It’s not so obvious.”

He chose one with care, with a driver who knew him. For that matter, almost all Parisian taxi drivers knew him.

“Rue de Longchamp. Drive dead slow down the street.”

The block of apartments where Francine Latour lived was fairly far up the street, near a famous restaurant where the chief inspector remembered eating several good lunches. Everything was closed. It was two in the morning. They had to find somewhere to park, and Maigret was grave, sullen, and taciturn.

“Drive around again. Stop when I tell you. Keep only your side lights on, like you were waiting for a fare.”

They were less than ten yards from the house. They could guess at the presence of a plain-clothes man, hidden in the shadow of a gateway. There must be another somewhere near, and up there Janvier and a companion were still waiting in the dark.

Maigret took small puffs on his pipe. He could feel Colombani's shoulder against his own. He had taken the side near the curb.

They stayed like that for forty-five minutes, and an occasional taxi passed, and some people arrived home a few houses farther up the street; at last a taxi drew up in front of the door, and a slimly built young man jumped out onto the sidewalk, and then bent forward toward the interior of the cab to help his companion out.

“Now!” was all Maigret said.

His movements were calculated. For a long time he had been holding the door of the taxi ajar, his fingers clenched around the handle. With unexpected lightness he sprang forward and leaped on the man just as he was putting one hand into his dinner-jacket pocket to find his wallet, and leaning forward to look at the taxi meter.

The young woman screamed. Maigret grasped the man by the shoulders, from behind, and, dragged down by his weight, rolled over with him onto the sidewalk.

The chief inspector, who had caught a blow on the chin from Bronsky's head, was trying to immobilize his hands for

fear he might grab his revolver. Colombani was already on the spot and, coldly and calmly, gave the Czech a kick in the face.

Francine Latour, still calling for help, had run up to the door and was ringing frantically. The two detectives now appeared, and the scuffle went on for a few moments longer. Maigret was the last to stand up, for he had been underneath.

“Anybody hurt?”

The side lights of the taxi enabled him to see the blood on his hand, and he looked around and saw that it was from Bronsky’s nose that blood was streaming. The man had both hands manacled behind him, which obliged him to bend forward a little. His face wore a ferocious expression.

“Pigs!” he spat out.

And as one of the plain-clothes men was preparing to punish this insult with a kick on the shins, Maigret said, feeling for the pipe in his pocket:

“Let him spit out his venom. It’s the only right he has left now.”

They almost forgot about Janvier and his companion in the apartment, where, no doubt, slaves to duty, they would have stayed hidden until daybreak.

TEN

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The first call was to the chief of Police Headquarters, which would probably not have pleased Comélieau.

“Perfect, old man. Now please oblige me by going to bed. We’ll take care of the rest tomorrow morning. Are we sending for the two stationmasters?”

Those of Goderville and Moucher, to identify the man who had been seen by one of them getting off a train on January 19, and by the other getting on one a few hours later.

“Colombani’s seen to that. They’re on their way.”

Jean Bronsky was with them in the office, sitting on a chair. There had never been so many beer glasses and sandwiches on the table. What most surprised the Czech was that no attempt was made to question him.

Francine Latour was there too. She had insisted on coming, for she was firmly convinced the police had made a mistake. Then, just as one gives a child a picture book to keep him quiet, Maigret had handed her Bronsky’s file, which she was now engaged in reading, casting an occasional terrified glance at her lover.

“What are you going to do?” Colombani inquired.

“Call the judge and then go to bed.”

“Can I drop you?”

“No, thanks. It’s too far out of your way.”

Maigret was cheating again, and Colombani knew it. He gave his address on Boulevard Richard Lenoir to the taxi driver in a loud voice, but a few moments later he tapped on the window.

“Follow the Seine. Toward Corbeil.”

And so he saw day break. He saw the first fishermen take up their places on the riverbanks, from which a fine mist was rising; he saw the first barges collecting in front of the locks,

and smoke beginning to rise from the houses into a mother-of-pearl sky.

“You’ll find an inn higher upstream,” he announced after they had gone through Corbeil.

They found it. Its shady terrace overlooked the Seine, and the house was surrounded by arbors that, on Sundays, must be crowded with visitors. The innkeeper, a man with a long red mustache, was busy baling out a boat, and fishing nets were spread out on the landing platform.

It amused Maigret, after the night he had just spent, to walk in the dew-drenched grass, to breathe in the smell of the earth and that of the logs burning in the hearth, and to see the maid, her hair still unkempt, bustling about in the kitchen.

“Are you serving coffee?”

“In a few minutes. We’re not really open yet.”

“Does your roomer usually come down early?”

“I’ve heard her walking around her bedroom for some time. Listen...”

And indeed they could hear footsteps above the ceiling, with its heavy, uncovered beams.

“It’s her coffee I’m just making.”

“Please set the table for two.”

“Are you a friend of hers?”

“Of course. I’d be surprised if I wasn’t.”

And this proved to be the case. It all happened quite simply. When he introduced himself, giving his rank, she was a little frightened, but he said very kindly:

“May I have something to eat with you?”

There were two breakfast sets of heavy earthenware laid out on the red-checked tablecloth in front of the window. Coffee was steaming in the bowls. The butter had a nutty taste.

She did indeed have a squint, in fact a terrible squint. She was aware of this, and when she felt herself being looked at

she grew flustered and embarrassed, and explained:

“When I was seventeen my mother made me have an operation, because my left eye turned inward. After the operation it turned outward. The surgeon offered to do it again free, but I said no.”

Well, after a few moments, one hardly noticed it. One could even see that she might be considered almost pretty.

“Poor Albert! If only you’d known him! Such a cheerful kind person, always wanting to make everybody happy.”

“He was your cousin, wasn’t he?”

“A distant second cousin.”

Her accent had its charm too. What one was chiefly aware of about her was a boundless need for affection. Not affection sought for herself, but affection that she needed to give out.

“I was nearly thirty when I lost my parents. I was an old maid. My parents had a little money and I’d never worked. I came to Paris because I was bored all alone in our big house. I barely knew Albert. But I’d heard people talk about him. I went to see him.”

Yes, of course. He understood. Albert had been lonely too. She must have surrounded him with attentions to which he was unused.

“If you knew how much I loved him! I never asked for him to love me, you understand? I know that wouldn’t have been possible. But he made me believe he did. And I pretended to believe it, so as to please him. We were happy, Chief Inspector. I’m sure he was happy. He had no reason not to be, had he? And we’d just been celebrating our wedding anniversary. I don’t know what happened at the races. He used to leave me in the stand while he went to place his bets. One time he came back looking worried and, ever since then, he began to look around him as if he was always on the lookout for somebody. He insisted that we go home by taxi, and he kept looking back. In front of our house he told the driver, ‘Keep going!’ I don’t know why. He made the man drive on to the Place de la Bastille. He got out, after he told me, ‘Go home

by yourself. I'll be there in an hour or two.' It was because someone was following him. That night he didn't come back. He called me up to say he'd be home next morning. Then, the next day, he called me up twice..."

"On Wednesday?"

"Yes. The second time, it was to tell me not to wait for him, to go to the movies. I didn't want to, but he insisted. He almost got mad. So I went. Have you arrested them?"

"All except one, who'll be caught before very long. I don't think he's dangerous by himself. We know who he is and we've got his description."

Maigret was speaking more truth than he realized. At that moment a detective from the Vice Squad was picking up Serge Madok in a brothel on Boulevard de La Chapelle, a filthy place chiefly frequented by Arabs, where he had gone to hide the night before, and which he had obstinately refused to leave.

But he offered no resistance. He was completely dazed, dead drunk, and had to be carried to the police van.

"What are you going to do now?" Maigret inquired gently as he filled his pipe.

"I don't know. I'll probably go back to my own part of the world. I can't run the restaurant on my own. And now I've got nobody."

She repeated the last word, looking around her as if seeking somebody to whom she could transfer her affection.

"I don't know what I'll do for a living."

"Suppose you were to adopt a child."

She raised her head, at first incredulous, and then she smiled:

"Do you think I could... they'd let me...?"

And the idea took shape so quickly in her mind and heart that Maigret was quite alarmed. Although he had not spoken entirely on a hunch, he had merely intended to see what would

happen. It was a thought that had occurred to him in the taxi as he was driving here, one of those fantastic, daring thoughts that one plays with when one is half asleep or in a state of extreme exhaustion, and the folly of which one realizes next morning.

“We’ll talk about it later. I’d like to see you again, if I may... In any case I have some accounts to settle with you—we took the liberty of reopening your restaurant.”

“Do you know of a child that—”

“Well, madame, there is one who in a few weeks’ or a few months’ time might have lost its mother.”

She flushed scarlet, and he had reddened too; he regretted now having foolishly raised this question.

“A baby, isn’t it?” she stammered.

“Yes, a tiny baby.”

“It’s not its fault.”

“Not in the least.”

“And it won’t necessarily be like—”

“Excuse me, madame. It’s time I went back to Paris.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think too much about it. I’m sorry now that I mentioned it.”

“No, you were right. Will I be able to see it? Tell me, do you think I’d be allowed to?”

“Let me ask you one more question. Albert told me over the phone that you knew me. I don’t remember ever having seen you.”

“But I’ve seen you, long ago, when I was just twenty. My mother was still alive, and we were spending our holidays at Dieppe...”

“The Hôtel Beauséjour!” he exclaimed.

He had spent two weeks there with Madame Maigret.

“All the hotel guests were talking about you and secretly watching you...”

He had the strangest feelings as the taxi took him back to Paris, through the countryside bathed in bright sunlight. The hedges were beginning to bud.

“It would be nice to have a holiday,” he thought, perhaps because of the memories of Dieppe that had just been conjured up.

He knew he would do nothing of the sort, but this happened to him periodically. It was like a cold that he shook off by working hard.

The suburbs... Joinville Bridge...

“Go by the Pont de Charenton.”

The bistro was open. Chevrier was looking a little embarrassed.

“I’m glad you came, Chief. They called me up and said it’s all over, and my wife’s wondering whether she should go to the market.”

“If she wants to.”

“Is there any point in it now?”

“None at all.”

“They asked me if I’d seen you, too. Seems they’ve been trying to get you at home and all over the place. Will you call the Quai?”

He hesitated. This time he was really at the end of his rope, and he wanted only one thing: the delight of slipping into a deep and dreamless sleep.

“I bet I’ll sleep for twenty-four hours.”

It was not true, unfortunately. He would be disturbed long before that. The people at Headquarters were too much in the habit—a habit he had allowed them to form— of saying on the slightest provocation, “Call Maigret!”

“What’ll you have, Chief?”

“A calvados, if you insist.”

It was with calvados that he had begun. He might as well end up with the same thing.

“Hello! Who wants me?”

It was Bodin. He had forgotten about Bodin. He must have forgotten about several more of them who were still keeping useless watches in various parts of Paris.

“I’ve got the letter, Chief.”

“What letter?”

“The General Delivery letter.”

“Oh yes. Good.”

Poor Bodin. His discovery was not being properly appreciated!

“Do you want me to open it and tell you what’s in it?”

“If you like.”

“Just a minute. Here we are. There’s no writing. Just a railway ticket.”

“All right.”

“Did you know?”

“I suspected it. A first-class return, Paris-Goderville.”

“Right. There are some stationmasters waiting here.”

“That’s Colombani’s business.”

And Maigret, as he sipped his calvados, gave a little smile. Another touch to be added to his picture of Little Albert, whom he had not known alive, but whom he had, as it were, reconstructed piece by piece.

Like certain other fans of the turf, Albert could not resist looking down at the ground, which was littered with blank betting sheets, among which one may occasionally discover a winner thrown away by mistake.

What he had found that morning was not a winner but a railway ticket.

If he had not had that mania... if he had not seen the man whose pocket it had fallen from... if the name Goderville had not immediately suggested the murders committed by the Picardy gang... if his face had not betrayed his feelings...

“Poor Albert!” sighed Maigret.

He would still be alive. On the other hand, a few more old farmers and their wives would doubtless have passed from life into death, after having had the soles of their feet scorched by Maria.

“My wife would like to shut the place up right away,” announced Chevrier.

“Go ahead.”

Then there were streets, a taxi meter indicating an astronomical figure, and a Madame Maigret who seemed a little less gentle when one had just made acquaintance with Nine, and who decided of her own accord, once he had got his nose between the sheets:

“This time I’m going to take the phone off the hook and I’ll open the door for nobody.”

He heard the beginning of the remark, but he never learned the end of it.

Tucson (Arizona)

December 17, 1947

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[for a complete bibliography of all 103 episodes of *The Maigret Saga*, check out [Steve Trussel's amazing fan site](http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm) at http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm]

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